

METRO EXODUS HANDS-ON VERDICT
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Do you find that games are most often ruined by the people you're forced to share them with? Perhaps I'm (increasingly) becoming a grumpy old man, but this has been my experience on too many occasions. A developer makes a really engrossing, clever online experience with great systems and rewards for playing in a co-operative and inclusive manner, and then a swarm of ingrates populates its servers, playing by their own rules. Perhaps you're even one of these people.

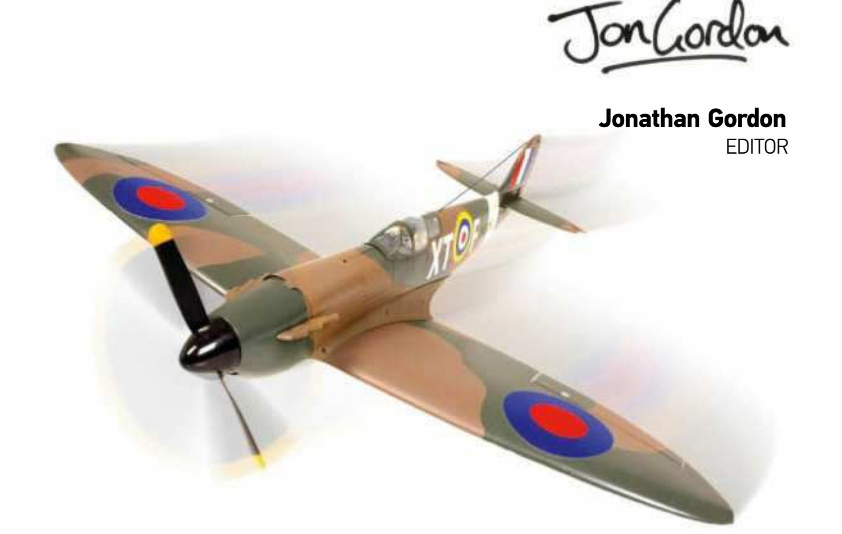
Don't get me wrong; I have nothing against you (although I did just call you an ingrate, so my apologies for that). No one is doing anything wrong, as such. The games just haven't been built to encourage one style of play while simultaneously discouraging another. Both exist at the same time.

So, whether it's pirates in *Sea Of Thieves* opening fire on every vessel they see regardless of their strength while the opposing vessel's players fire nothing but shanty chords in the opposite direction, or Battlefield players thinking they're Rambo and ignoring the objective, too often it's 'other people' who are making these games annoying and less fun to play. But where we see annoyance we should be reacting with solutions, and thankfully DICE appears to be on the case for *Battlefield V*.

Playing the objective should be what these games are all about and DICE wants to make that not only clear, but the most fun way to play this time around. I for one will be delighted if it does. This grumpy man persona is a real drag.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR



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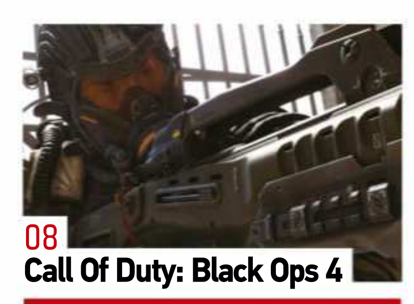
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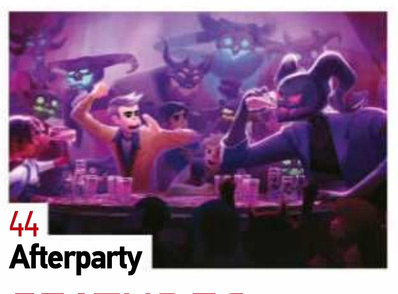


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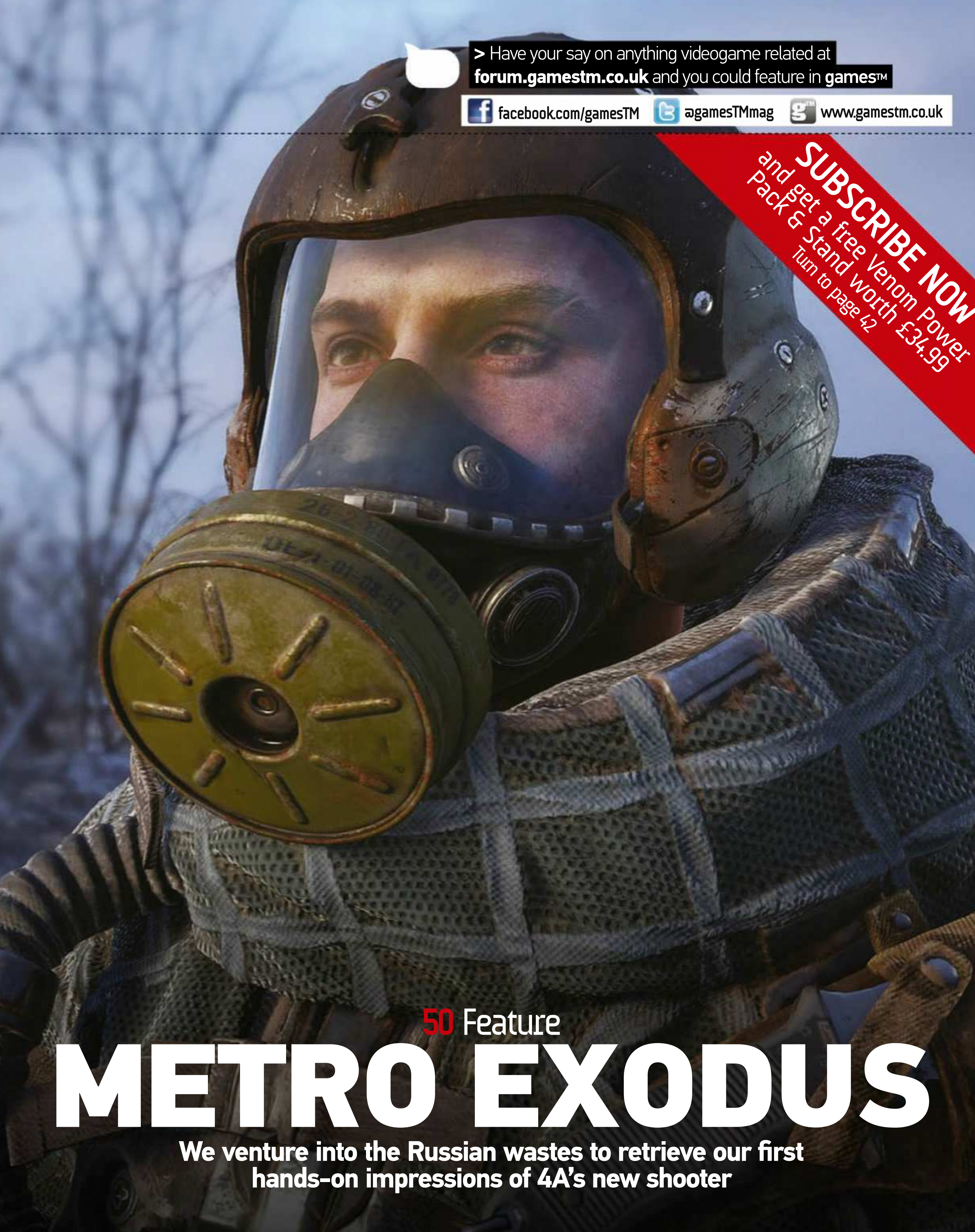
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We venture into the Russian wastes to retrieve our first hands-on impressions of 4A's new shooter

ACCESS

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OPINION



BATTLE ROYALE GOES TRIPLE-A IN CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS 4

→ WE SIT DOWN WITH TREYARCH TO UNDERSTAND ITS LATEST TAKE ON HIGH-OCTANE, ONLINE MULTIPLAYER FPS ACTION

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION** | DEVELOPER: **TREYARCH** | RELEASE: **12 OCT 2018** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

"BLACKOUT IS ABOUT US WANTING TO MAKE A BATTLE ROYALE GAME MODE IN A WAY THAT RETAINS THE ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF BLACK OPS"
MATT SCRONCE, TREYARCH



There are two major things that you need to know about *Call of Duty: Black Ops 4*. First, the single player campaign is out. In fact, there's nothing at all that could be described as typical narrative content. You're out of luck if that was your reason for playing Call Of Duty.

Second, a battle royale mode in the vein of that offered by the likes of *Fortnite* and *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* is in. Developer Treyarch's take on the game mode that has taken the world by storm promises to deliver big by including land, air and sea vehicles and a huge map (over 1,500 times the size of *Black Ops'* Nuketown map) but there remain more questions than answers at this point. More on that later.

So, *Black Ops 4* is a multiplayer focused experience down to its core. Three game modes are due to ship on initial release: Blackout, Zombies and the traditional suite of multiplayer modes such as Team Deathmatch, Domination, Hardpoint, etc.

Franchises that have reached the popularity and status of Call Of Duty tend not to make many bold moves for fear of upsetting their enormous fan bases, and so this swing of direction is both surprising and daring. Clearly, in the face of shifting tastes among shooter fans – demonstrated not least by the global phenomenon that is *Fortnite* – something had to change. As such, no matter the outcome, Treyarch and publisher Activision deserve some credit for making a move.

Whether or not the move will be positive from a game design and wider game balance perspective still remains to be seen, however, the removal of a campaign is unlikely to weaken the franchise's appeal given that the majority of its players have been flocking primarily to its multiplayer offerings for years.

"Games are getting more social and are going to continue going that way," says *Black Ops 4* game designer Matt Scronce when asked for the reasoning behind his game's change of course.

"Even with *Black Ops 3*'s campaign we didn't do things in a normal way," Matt explains. "You could play it completely out of order and approach it in different ways and play through in co-op. We didn't care too much if you were focusing on the narrative or not, we wanted you to be able to jump in and out of it whenever you wanted, whether with friends or solo."

Recent Call Of Duty campaigns have offered little originality and so the decision to get rid of it altogether has the potential to alter the entire franchise for the better. By no longer having part of the team focused on producing something that must abide by a set of design rules that have become ingrained over the series' history there should exist greater freedom to think more creatively about how to move the triple-A, first-person shooter to the next level.

IN BRIEF

Black Ops IV is a bold attempt to mix up the Call Of Duty formula by ditching the traditional campaign and concentrating on three forms of multiplayer

The introduction of a battle royale mode might seem like the most obvious and creatively stunted addition, but, nevertheless, there exists huge flexibility in the core concept and the full gamut of potential has by no means been reached. Treyarch promises that Blackout will play and feel like a unique experience.

"We wouldn't even be trying to do [battle royale] if we couldn't add something fresh and unique to the genre," Yale Miller, senior producer, tells us. "Battle royale is a great game mode and one that we've been looking at for a long time and, clearly, is one that a lot of people want to play.

"What we love about battle royale is that no two matches are the same. Add to that the great gunplay, gritty realism and high-fidelity graphics from Black Ops games and you've got something that's really fun and something you can't get anywhere else from battle royale." »



Treyarch is keeping the player count under wraps, as well as the exact mechanics that we'll be able to employ. Vehicles are confirmed, as is the fact that a number of gadgets from the whole *Black Ops* series (like the exploding radio-controlled car) will be appearing.

Characters from across *Black Ops*' campaigns and Zombies will be available as skins, although how they're unlocked is a mystery. Neither Miller or Scronce would agree to answer any questions at all relating to Blackout's progression system.

What they have promised is a map that includes familiar locations from previous *Black Ops* games. It's unlikely that these areas will be brought in wholesale and simply stitched together to create a larger map, but long-term fans are sure to recognise some of the environment and be able to point to the original inspiration.

Going back and imagining fresh ways to explore previous designs is one of the reasons Treyarch is so keen to include a battle royale mode. "Part of Blackout is about bringing back things that we want to see again," explains Scronce. "Sometimes I think, 'I want to play as Riggs again and I want to see this game mechanic in a new way'.

"A lot of the ideas have come from those, 'Wouldn't it be awesome if…?' conversations. Thinking about it like that has given us a lot of freedom to be able to try a lot of different things. This game mode gives you so much freedom because you're not bound by the usual rules of multiplayer or the rules required to be taken seriously on the esports side."

That's not to say the rules elsewhere haven't changed. The divisive thrust jumping and wall-running abilities introduced in *Black Ops 3* are out, thankfully, replaced by a concentration on fighting on the ground alongside your teammates.

In each multiplayer match – whether that's Domination, Team Deathmatch or otherwise – you must select one of ten 'Specialists' to use in battle, their abilities combining with your weapon and gear selections to add another layer of loadout customisation.

Ajax is a frontline force, able to stun enemies with powerful flash grenades and provide cover for allies with a large, moveable shield. Different altogether is Recon, an intel gatherer who is comparatively unsuited to direct engagements. His Sensor Dart reveals enemies on the map, while Vision Pulse means you can see their movement through walls.

Elsewhere, Ruin has the Grapple Gun that can be used to move quickly horizontally and vertically and a Grav Slam attack that sends shockwaves across an small area. Torque is defensively minded and can deploy Razor Wire to block off doorways or corridors and a Barricade skill that locks down tight spaces even more readily.

"Specialists give more importance to tactical decisions and that's a great benefit for players like me, who aren't the best in moving around the map at top speed," laughs Scronce. "Instead, I'm winning by thinking about situations clearly, deciding whether to stick with my team or not and creatively combining the abilities of my Specialist with everyone else."

Specialist abilities are on a cooldown timer, preventing matches dissolving into each team spamming the new moves constantly. Their relative rarity means that mastering the core Call Of Duty skills – movement, accuracy and timing – remain the best way to win. Such abilities, however, mean that there are more ways to approach how you play.

> "WE'RE REALLY TRYING TO DO ALL WE CAN TO MAKE SURE ALL DIFFERENT KINDS OF PLAYERS CAN BE SUCCESSFUL"
> **YALE MILLER, TREYARCH**

"It's not all about directly killing your enemy anymore," Miller adds. "If Ruin bursts into the room and gets some kills, then anyone who has boosted Ruin before that is going to get a higher score, too – whether that's through healing, or revealing enemies or whatever.

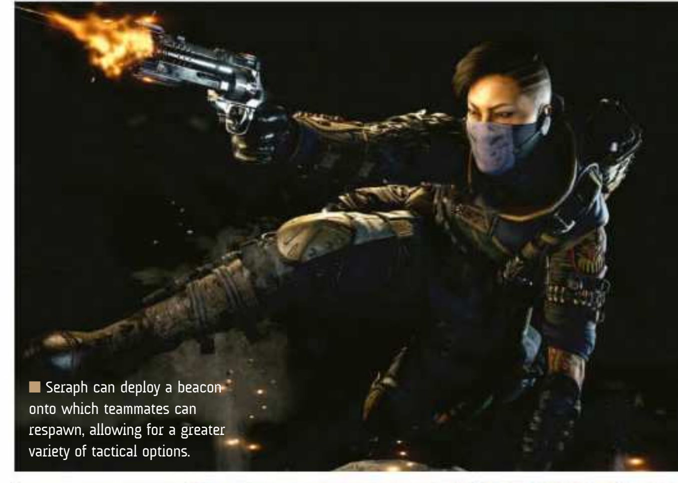
"We're trying to take away some of the emphasis on kill/death ratio and focus on your wider impact on a match. Now we take better account of how you're using your equipment. Even if you never fire your gun you can be adding to your score and helping your team."

Working as a team is the best way to go and not only because of the many ways Specialists can synchronise their skills. The mini-map now only shows enemies' movement in your immediate vicinity, meaning you have to rely on Specialist skills to help monitor your opposition. Further, healing is no longer automatic and instead you must heal yourself using a new medikit system or stick with a healing specialist.

The changes to the heath system are particularly interesting in that you now have more options and therefore more decisions to make. Do you continue pushing forward when injured and try to take advantage of a good opportunity, or do you pull back to heal and accept that the enemy might either rush you or heal themselves?

In comparison to the previous system of waiting around for the auto-heal to engage, what's presented here puts the onus on you to make quick judgments under pressure. We've played multiplayer for only an hour, but we came away feeling pretty impressed with how a seemingly small change can alter the tone quite considerably. It's been a mainstay of the series for so long that it makes a massive difference to this new installment.

These more detailed changes combine with larger ones, such as the removal of the campaign and the introduction of Blackout to make *Black Ops 4* the most interesting Call Of Duty in years. Whether or not that interest now is repaid in quality upon release remains to be seen, but it's nice to be able to look forward to some originality from a series that has played it safe for too long.



Seraph can deploy a beacon onto which teammates can respawn, allowing for a greater variety of tactical options.



■ Above: The campaign might have gone and the nature and importance of team play might have changed, but the speed and style of gunplay remains incredibly similar to that we've come to know from Call Of Duty. Left: The zombies scenarios promise to be even more outlandish than those of previous Call Of Duty offerings.





■ Specialist Ajax is the tank of the group, sporting a mobile, bullet-absorbing shield and a powerful flash grenade.



CREATE-A-ZOMBIE

Treyarch first introduced Zombies in *Call Of Duty: World At War*, but by the studio's own estimation the mode is in need of new ideas. It's up to you what those ideas look like.

One hundred 'modifiers' are to be included on day one, each allowing you to customise your game as you wish. Overall difficultly can be set from easy to hard, as can the health and damage ratings of you and the zombies and what kind of loot each maps holds to help you kill and survive.

Further, a new Zombie Rush option is coming and, designed for newcomers, it loosens a lot of the rules to provide a more welcoming setting to engage with what can be an unforgiving experience.

RAGE 2 MAKES ONE HELL OF A FIRST IMPRESSION

→ WELCOME TO THE THUNDERDOME

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA SOFTWORKS**
DEVELOPER: **AVALANCHE STUDIOS, ID SOFTWARE** | RELEASE: **Q1 2019** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

How do you make a populace interested in a seven-year-old IP that faded unceremoniously from view as quickly as it had once arrived? There's only one thing that you can do: you pivot, and you pivot *hard*. Bethesda is bringing back *Rage*, and it's doing so with some serious style. *Rage 2* is a madcap FPS that's clear in its ambition and intentions, built around the mantra of propagating pure chaos in a sprawling open-world wasteland.

Given how muted the 2011 release was in almost every respect, this all might come as a bit of a culture shock – the colour, the speed, *the noise*. Though when you discover which two studios are working in collaboration that surprise should give way to curiosity. Avalanche Studios Stockholm – responsible for *Just Cause 1* and *2* – is taking on lead development duties alongside the architects of gaming's greatest shotguns, id Software. It means expectations are high here as Avalanche attempts to course-correct after its somewhat dour take on the Mad Max universe in 2015. *Rage 2* is colourful and vibrant, bloody and boisterous, and captures the spirit of its biggest inspiration while still pushing into bold new spaces.



THE STORY

After an asteroid annihilates 80 per cent of the Earth's population, society crumbles as law and order dissolve into disorder and dysfunction. Bloodthirsty gangs roam the open roads of the wasteland and it's up to you, Walker, the last Ranger of the wasteland, to push back against the tyranny of The Authority. It isn't yet clear whether this is a full reboot or whether some story elements will tie back into the 2011 original.

IN BRIEF
Rage makes a surprise return, with Bethesda bringing the Just Cause and Doom developers together to create a manic open-world experience



"AVALANCHE STUDIOS STOCKHOLM IS TAKING ON LEAD DEVELOPMENT DUTIES ALONGSIDE THE ARCHITECTS OF GAMING'S GREATEST SHOTGUNS, ID SOFTWARE"

THE WEAPONS

■ id Software knows its way around a virtual shotgun. The studio is lending its expertise to Avalanche to help fill this ridiculous open world with a variety of awesome new weapons. Each of them will be fully upgradable, allowing you to push the guns beyond their mechanical limitations, a necessary pursuit for *Rage 2* to fulfil its promise of being able to "go anywhere, shoot anything and explode everything."



THE WORLD

■ Avalanche is the master of open-world chaos, and it's bringing its A-game to the development of *Rage 2*. The studio is building a thriving and varied wasteland, from lush jungles to treacherous swamps and sprawling deserts. Thankfully, you won't be exploring it exclusively on foot; if you can see it, you can drive it, from your fully customisable ride to gyrocopters and monster trucks.





10 NEED-TO-KNOW DETAILS ON RED DEAD REDEMPTION II

→ THERE IS NO TELLING WHAT ROCKSTAR WILL ACCOMPLISH NEXT

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES** | DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR STUDIOS** | RELEASE: **26 OCTOBER 2018** | PLAYERS: **TBC**

IMPOSSIBLE GOALS

1 Rockstar is looking to once again reinvent the game genre it so famously pioneered. Given that *Grand Theft Auto V* is the most profitable entertainment release in history, bringing in over $6 billion in sales since its launch in 2013, there is clearly a lot of pressure to deliver.

FAMILIAR FACES

2 We spent much of *Red Dead Redemption* hunting down the feared Van Der Linde gang, though this prequel will give us the opportunity to actually establish the infamy of Dutch and his crew. Expect to see the likes of Dutch Van Der Linde and John Marston make a return.

LIVE IN INFAMY

3 *RDRII* is wholly centred on establishing legend across the land. Everything that you do – every interaction, action and decision – will have the opportunity to shape both the story and the way in which the NPCs who inhabit the world react and respond to your presence.

FOR HONOR

4 The returning Honor system will effectively change Morgan's standing in the wider world. The more famous he becomes the more likely it is that townsfolk and the law will treat him favourably. The more notoriety he gains the more likely that people will react with hostility or fear.

A SEAMLESS EXPERIENCE

5 The Honor system has been tied in deeply to the core experience. Rockstar doesn't want the two to be separate; instead they are intrinsically linked, seamless. The studio is adamant that its work here will ultimately create a more immersive, reactive world that feels *real*.

IN BRIEF
Rockstar Games' highly anticipated reinvention of the open-world sandbox set in the dying embers of the Wild West





MAKING YOUR MARK

6 While even the smallest interactions and decisions can move the needle in the Honor system – looting campsites or assisting others in need – one of the largest shifts is going to come from your acts with the Van Der Linde gang. Heists are going to be a big part of this one, folks.

PLANNING MAKES PERFECT

7 Much like in *GTA V*, planning is essential to executing the perfect heist. It'll be up to you to build and foster relationships with the rest of the gang to better inform how you want to tackle individual scenarios, such as the bank heist glimpsed in the trailer.

BETTER HANDLING

8 The teams have clearly put a lot of effort into forging one of the most beautiful open worlds ever created, but we're yet to see the brand-new weapons system. *RDRII* will feature weapons that handle more realistically, giving you more control over duels and shootouts.

CUSTOMISABLE EXPERIENCE

9 Rockstar is clearly aware of what other studios have been doing in the open-world space. The HUD, for example, isn't going to be fundamentally different, but it will be fully customisable, letting you remove objective markers, the compass and even deactivate the mini-map.

CLEARING OUT

10 *RDRII* has disrupted the autumn release window. Once Rockstar confirmed the 26 October release date, many other studios started clearing out of the way, and for good reason too – this game is going to have ridiculous impact. It's going to set a new open-world benchmark.







DAYS GONE STILL HAS A LONG WAY TO GO

→ COULD SONY'S RUN OF QUALITY EXCLUSIVES BE HITTING A BUMP IN THE ROAD?

FORMAT: **PS4** | PUBLISHER: **SONY INTERACTIVE ENTERTAINMENT** | DEVELOPER: **SIE BEND STUDIO** | RELEASE: **Q1 2019** | PLAYERS: **1**

We've been pretty spoiled by Sony this generation. Barring the occasional stumble here (*Knack*) and there (*The Order: 1886*), the quality of games arriving on the PlayStation 4 as platform exclusives has been pretty excellent across the board. It's been so impressive that, truth be told, it's set a standard of expected quality and ingenuity that is effectively impossible for all but Sony's most trusted and battle-hardened first-party studios to match. That perception of pristine presentation can, of course, bring with it its own share of pitfalls – one of which SIE Bend Studio is stumbling over itself to avoid.

Days Gone turned heads when it was revealed in 2016; its somewhat contrived premise was quickly overlooked as an impressive technical demonstration dominated the conversation, with swathes of players becoming entranced by the title's *The Last Of Us*-like presentation and the gargantuan hordes of zombies that seemed to seamlessly flow through its sprawling open world. Fast-forward two years and *Days Gone* is struggling to separate itself from the crowd, arriving after the lacklustre *State Of Decay 2* and delayed into 2019 to better give the development team the opportunity to tackle bugs, iron out performance problems and better streamline its daunting vision of a post-apocalyptic Pacific Northwest.

In many respects, it looks as if Bend Studio has bitten off a little more than it can chew when you take a broad, objective look at what's on offer. *Days Gone* is effectively two experiences crammed into one, and fresh footage would indicate that the pair do not play well together. The first is the core vision for what the game could be, of you on your bike exploring the vast wilderness, absorbing the world's natural beauty while struggling to survive, hunting for precious resources, managing dwindling fuel supplies and generally doing your best to steer clear of any zombi– sorry, Freaker hordes that might be amassing around your person at any one time. The second is what the game will be during its moment-to-moment action, a more traditional third-person shooter working under the guise of an open-world survival game, ropey gunplay and predictable enemy behaviours from its human combatants crammed around a predictably bland protagonist and noisy game world.

IN BRIEF

Attempt to survive in this deadly open world, one that is littered with decaying zombies and desperate humans just looking to make it through to the next sunrise alive

The assessment of the latter experience isn't a problem that is exclusive to *Days Gone*, it's one that genre games have found themselves in contention with for most of this generation. It should come as no surprise to learn that *Days Gone* entered active production in 2015, shortly after *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt* and the next-gen *GTA V* offering. Unlike many of the other blockbuster games arriving from Sony, *Days Gone* doesn't appear to be advancing, expanding or defining its chosen genre. It's a cold reminder that all games – even ones coming exclusively to PS4 – aren't created equally. There's every chance *Days Gone* will impress when it lands in Q1 of 2019, but there's some pretty clear issues emerging now that we're seeing more of the game.



Above: *Days Gone* might look like it shares a world with *The Last Of Us*, but that couldn't be further from the case. The games couldn't be any more different in execution, with Bend Studios' effort eagerly trying to take post-apocalyptic survival into the throngs of a deadly open world.

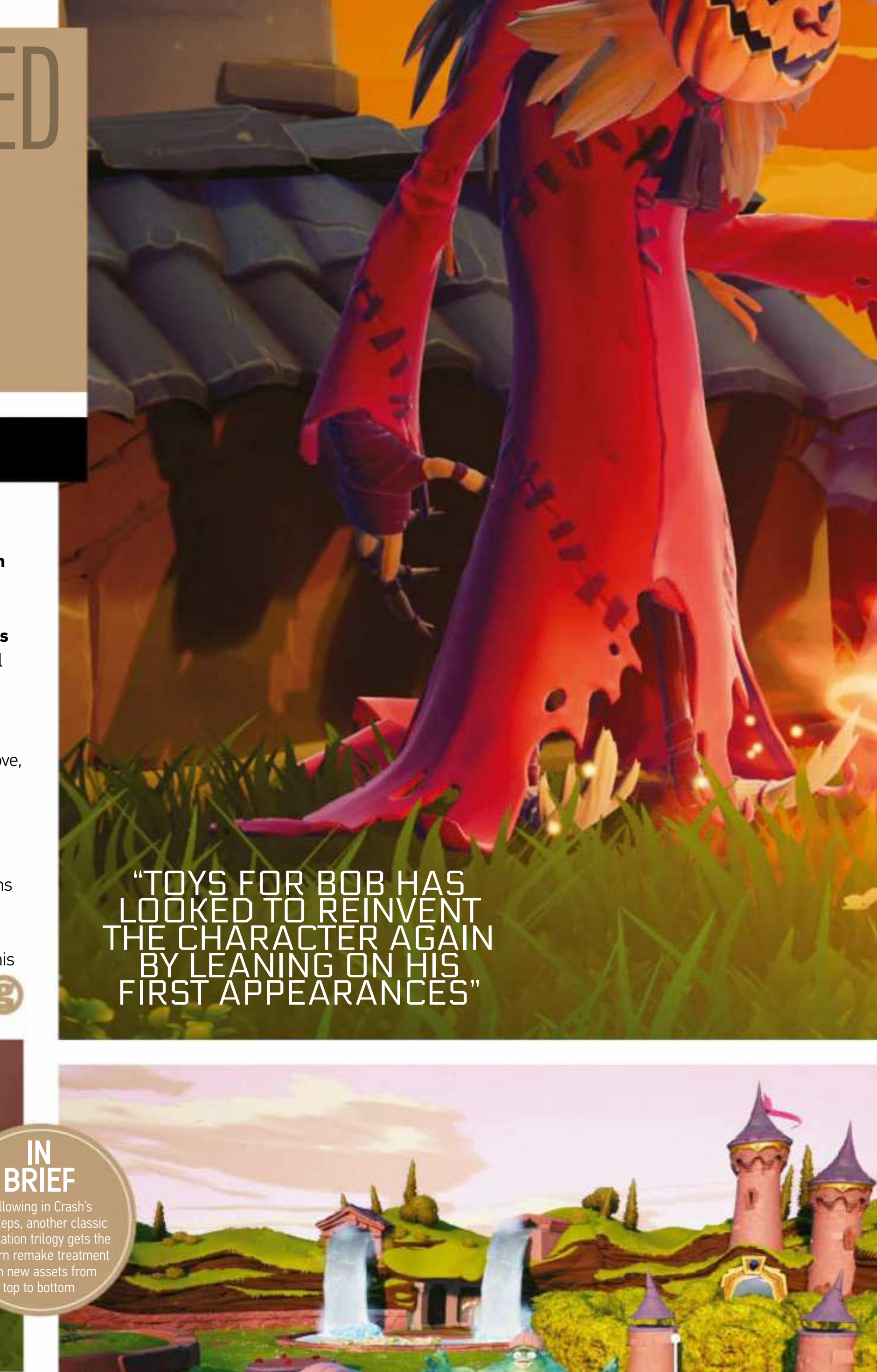
SPYRO REIGNITED TRILOGY BRINGS THE FIRE BACK

→ THE FORMER SKYLANDERS TEAM IS TAKING THE CLASSIC DRAGON HERO BACK TO BASICS

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION**
DEVELOPER: **TOYS FOR BOB** | RELEASE: **21 SEP 2018** | PLAYERS: **1**

It seems like a lifetime ago that Spyro The Dragon span off into a whole new series and became one of the biggest players in the toys-to-life sphere, but that's what happened, and as a result a classic, but declining hero was given a new lease of life. But times have moved on, and the original PlayStation generation is growing older and more nostalgic, as the success of the *Crash Bandicoot N. Sane Trilogy* proved, so it feels like a logical next step for Activision to revive its other PSone mascot in a similar fashion. That it has Toys For Bob at the helm is a promising move, given its familiarity with the character up to this point.

The team made the original *Skylanders* and worked on the series from 2011 to 2016, but despite being so ingrained in this modern incarnation of Spyro, it has looked to reinvent the character again by leaning on his first appearances and trying to recapture the mannerisms and attitude of those titles. It's even gone so far as to hire the original voice actor, Tom Kenny, who voiced Spyro in *Ripto's Rage* and *Year Of The Dragon*. He's also the voice of Spongebob Squarepants. Anyway, this trilogy covers the first three games, completely remaking them top to bottom, and it looks absolutely stunning.



"TOYS FOR BOB HAS LOOKED TO REINVENT THE CHARACTER AGAIN BY LEANING ON HIS FIRST APPEARANCES"

IN BRIEF

Following in Crash's footsteps, another classic PlayStation trilogy gets the modern remake treatment with new assets from top to bottom

DRAGON WITH ATTITUDE

Looking back on the original PSone games, there's very little detail in the polygons that make up Spyro. So much of his personality came through his voice acting and movement, but now Toys For Bob has been able to make a much more expressive and detailed model. We'd say he looks even better in this than he did in the Skylanders titles. We think it may all be in the expressive brow and smirks he now gives.

PERSONALITY PREVAILS

The additional details in character design don't stop at Spyro, as you'll see when Toasty, one of the bosses from the first game, makes an appearance. The towering and terrifying scarecrow is actually a disgruntled sheep on stilts under a cloak, and while that wasn't revealed until midway through your fight in the original, you'll now see the sheep poking its head out through the coat as you battle. There are likely to be a bunch of fun additions like this throughout the game.

BIG OLD WORLD

The world design that Toys For Bob is inheriting from Insomniac (the original developer) is very good. It created pretty large and open spaces for Spyro to explore, allowing his glide ability to really get a good workout. By contemporary standards, it was a massive game, which managed to be highly atmospheric, even if it lacked detail. The *Reignited Trilogy* brings that detail back, and the richness it adds makes for something really impressive.



SINGED ENDS

There are some nice touches of interactivity in the game world now. These are things that are fairly common with modern engines and technology, but would have been impossible on PSone for such an expansive and open game. For instance, Spyro's flame attacks will actually singe and burn the ground, leaving smouldering remains of grass in his wake. The grass is rendered blade by blade and moves as Spyro runs through it too, which is a nice upgrade from the flat surfaces of the original.



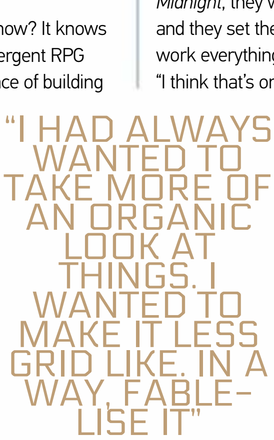
HOW KYNSEED IS BRINGING SANDBOX SCOPE TO ITS 2D RPG

→ THE EX-LIONHEAD DEVELOPMENT TEAM DISCUSSES ITS PLANS

FORMAT: **PC** | PUBLISHER: **PIXELCOUNT STUDIOS** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **1**

Write what you know, the old adage tells us, and for the team at PixelCount Studios, leaving after many years working at Lionhead Studios, make what you know made sense as it planned a new open RPG concept. "I think we had other ideas of games to do, but decided that we knew about this genre and we had a lot of experience with it and we should take the lessons learned and hopefully reduce the risk a bit by simplifying and going 2D rather than 3D," studio co-founder and technical director Neal Whitehead explains.

So, what does PixelCount know? It knows open-world design. It knows emergent RPG gameplay. It knows the importance of building relationships with NPCs in-game to feel a sense of belonging. All of this and more is being fed into the world of *Kynseed*, its pixel-art indie debut. And, conceptually at least, it all sounds a lot like something former employer Lionhead might have cooked up with an ageing lead character, wider-world impact from your decisions and more.



"For me personally, I worked on *Fable 1* before it became *Fable* back in the Project Ego days and we had ideas there about people ageing and remembering and things, but they never sort of came out in *Fable*," co-founder and design director Charlie Edwards reveals. "The hero aged, and the NPCs reacted to stuff but didn't really have their own lives." PixelCount wanted to dip back into that bag of ideas that didn't quite make the cut and give them another try in a simplified format. *Kynseed* places you in the shoes of a blank hero, touched by fate as a faerie named Mr Fairweather hands them the titular Kynseed and sends the plot on its way. From there you can play as you wish with adventures, jobs, relationships and skills to work on, deals to make with Mr Fairweather that could make you stronger, but shorten your lifespan, kids to have and raise if you want and then you die, passing your mantle on to one of your children for them to carry on. It promises a mix of *Stardew Valley*, modern pixel-art RPGs, a dash of Fable and something perhaps even a little older in there too.

"Games like *Midwinter* and *Lords Of Midnight*, they were just massive open worlds and they set the player going and you had to work everything out yourself," Edwards tells us. "I think that's one thing that we've always been really interested in, getting away from this babying of the player and capturing that magical time again." And as a result, *Kynseed* promises to be something of a sprawling and challenging environment to master, aided in part by the freeform approach to world building the team is utilising.

"We had seen a lot of tile-based 2D games around recently," explains Whitehead. "Although we started the prototype very much in that mould of just doing 32x32 tile sets and very square and very organised, I had always wanted to take more of an organic look at things. I wanted to make it less grid like. In a way, *Fable*-lise it. *Fable* is similarly very organic in nature compared to a lot of RPGs at the time. After the initial tile set went in I added a capability to place down sprites at any position and then Matthew Weekes, who is the environment artist on it, did a great job of putting together lots of pieces of foliage or flowers, just reams and »



IN BRIEF
The very best of emergent, freeform RPG experiences, simplified into a 2D form and sprinkled with a little faerie magic

YOUR FAIRY GODFATHER

The most curious and influential NPC of the game is going to be the faerie, Mr Fairweather. He is the one who will give you the Kynseed, beginning your journey through generations in the game. He is also the one who will give you skills and items, but at the cost of years of your life. He is the malevolent, but not entirely unhelpful force working behind the curtain of the game and he's massively influenced by classic British folklore as well as some more recent stories.

"From growing up where I used to live in North Yorkshire, the whole place was steeped in folklore," design director Charlie Edwards tells us as we explore the origins of Mr Fairweather. "There's druidic stones everywhere, and you get ghost stories and pubs with weird little items that curse people and stuff. It was just a part of growing up. Then I think the biggest influence apart from the movie *The Wicker Man*, which I'm obsessed with, was the book *Jonathan Strange And Mr Norrell*. It is absolutely amazing, and Mr Fairweather is our take, in a way, on The Gentleman With The Thistledown Hair from that book."

And it sounds as if deciphering his motivations in all of this may play a big role in the game too. "No one is going to be able to guess his motives until right at the very end, which is one thing that we want to keep going," Edwards adds. "He's definitely the most interesting character in the game."











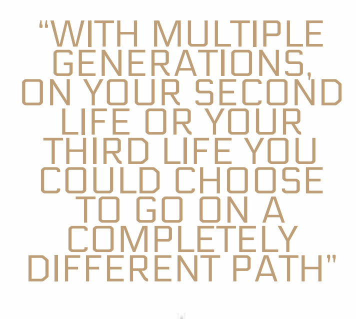
Above: There are plenty of jobs and pastimes you can take up in *Kynseed* to keep you occupied between RPG adventures. Fishing, smithing and more are available to you, and you can build up a business (or businesses across multiple towns) to keep your family well looked after.
Left: Food in the game will behave a little like in *Monster Hunter*, replenishing abilities and offering short-term buffs for taking on some of the world's tougher creatures. PixelCount Studios is promising that *Kynseed* will offer some serious challenges.

reams of stuff. I think we're currently at around 3,500 different sprites. I don't know how that compares to other games, but it seems like quite a lot."

That's a lot of content, but *Kynseed* isn't expecting you to explore it all in a single lifetime, as mentioned before. Planting the Kynseed gives you a literal family tree in the game that will grow and change as you pass down your skills from one generation to the next. Having a family is a massive part of how the game evolves and gives you new challenges. "Do you nurture your children or are you obsessed with growing your business and getting these items?" asks Edwards. "The more time you spend with your children, nurturing them and teaching them things, the better they'll be when you pass down to them. And each child you have to choose from will have perks, which then pass on to future children." So, you can teach them new skills, build businesses to hand down to them and more, and then they become your player character, keeping the adventure going. But it also takes attention and care, as absentee parents means the kids won't grow up to be as smart or capable as they could have been.

But you can do as you wish. *Kynseed* is all about player freedom and, while there may be consequences to your decisions, you can still lean into certain roles or gameplay mechanics more than others if you wish. "You are free to do exactly what you want," insists Edwards. "It's a life simulator after all. After the prologue opens up and you get the Kynseed, if you want to run a business, run all of the businesses; there are four different shop types, you can run the businesses in all of the six villages, which is going to take a lot of time manipulation and micromanagement. If you want to do that you can do that. If you just want to go on adventures you can do that. If you want to nurture your kids, it's up to you. It's a go where you want, do what you want when you want to do it type of thing. There's no handholding. There's not much tutorialising."

And if you get a little tired of the direction you've been going in or want to try being a little more evil or a little more family-focused, the soft reset of passing down to your children makes that possible. "In a typical RPG you're kind of playing the role of whatever character or persona you've built in your head for your player and you're kind of locked into that," suggests production manager Matt Allen. "But, with multiple generations, on your second life or your third life you could choose to go on a completely different path, which is a nice way to keep it refreshed, I think."



To keep this generational cycle going the game obviously needs to depict the passage of time. For your hero character that means ageing, but also some time leaps if you end up selling chunks of life to Mr Fairweather for upgrades (or die too young, which Mr Fairweather will save you from, but at the cost of some additional years down the line). "At the moment there are two weeks per season, and then at the end of each year Mr Fairweather comes to collect his tax, and then you'll wake up. If you bought anything, you'll wake up on the first day of spring at that age," Edwards tells us, although there are some tweaks being made. "I think that will still be undergoing a lot of balance, because now that we've got the backer beta out there, we're seeing how players are playing and seeing their comments on how long days are," Whitehead clarifies. "So that's interesting to know if we're on the right track or not."

And with those seasons comes a rotation of experiences, with changes in weather, items, access and enemies to take into account. "There are ingredients that would only be accessible in certain seasons, each village has their own special ingredient, their own customs, that are affected by the seasons," reveals Edwards. "In one village they can't grow certain vegetables because it's winter, but another village has something they can get in winter, which the other village now wants. So there will be those sorts of economies. And there will be places inaccessible during winter, but others via summer. We're hoping to get a bit more gameplay variety in there than just changing the colour scheme, definitely. And new creatures will emerge as well. Certain folklore creatures only come on winter's nights and so on. That will just keep it interesting."

There's just so much attention to detail going into *Kynseed* with things like character traits, a full food system (similar to *Breath Of The Wild* or *Monster Hunter*) and NPC routines that can be learnt and engaged with that we don't have the space to get into here. There's a layering of systems that feed into one another that should give this 2D experience a far more open feel than we've experienced in that format for a while. And while we may be waiting a little longer, there's a prototype demo available and an early access build in the works, so we highly recommend you keep an eye out.





IS NINTENDO HOLDING YOUR SAVE DATA TO RANSOM?

→ SWITCH ONLINE HAS BEEN UNVEILED, AND IT'S SOMETHING OF A NECESSITY

How much value do you place on your time? That's a question Nintendo is stealthily asking Switch owners to answer as it finally unveils plans for its long-awaited premium online service.

The home console-handheld hybrid has had one fatal flaw since its launch in March of 2017, and it's one that Nintendo is now finally addressing, although it is doing so in a somewhat unsatisfactory fashion. As it stands, it's impossible to transfer your save data off of the system; you can't back it up onto a personal hard drive, you can't shift it between the hardware and an SD card, and there is no option for cloud saving.

Given that the Switch works best as a handheld device, the spectre of loss, theft or accidental damage is ever-present. The inability to keep a copy of that 100-plus hour *Breath Of The Wild* save in case the worst should happen has effectively become its own form of insurance, forcing owners to be extra careful when traversing public spaces unless you want to find yourself stumbling back out of the Shrine Of Resurrection without a shirt on your (virtual) back and a scowl on your (very real) face.

The launch of Nintendo Switch Online this September, a service that looks to mimic Xbox Live and PlayStation Plus, will finally give players the opportunity to transfer their data away from the console for safe keeping. That in and of itself is a good thing. However, to take advantage of this feature – a feature that, frankly, should have been there at launch – you'll need to pay for it. $19.99 a year is as precise a cost as can be confirmed until UK pricing is announced. This makes the Switch the only current-generation console (and service, if we are going to ignore that PC gaming has a life outside of Steam) that fails to allow you to freely back up your save data.

IN BRIEF
Nintendo has finally detailed its subscription online service and it could be a must-buy for anyone who wants freedom and control over their games

A subscription to PlayStation Plus will run you £49.99 a year and Xbox Live Gold £39.99. Both are far more expensive than the Switch offering, but they are also established, reliable (well… as can be reasonably expected), and an intrinsic part of the wider ecosystem and experiences that have come to define the platforms. Nintendo wading into the world of online is still something of an unknown quantity.

When it comes to PS Plus, you need to pay that subscription fee to access cloud saves, but you don't need to be a premium member to take advantage of local save transfers. Gold subscribers and Steam users are able to take advantage of both cloud storage and local saves without an additional cost. And so here we are once again, with Nintendo demonstrating that every time it takes a single step forward in regards to online services it takes a number of steps backwards too. It's a frustration that players are going to have to bear if they want the opportunity to store save games away from the system itself. While online multiplayer has been free on Switch for the last 16 months, a subscription





Nintendo Switch Online will give players access to a selection of classic NES games – 20 at launch – with more to be added regularly in the future.



is going to be a necessary purchase should you want to continue taking advantage of compet tive play in games such as *Splatoon 2*, *ARMS*, *Mario Kart 8 Deluxe* and *Mario Tennis Aces* – not to mention, we imagine, upcoming titles such as *Super Smash Bros*, *Monster Hunter Generations Ultimate* and the rumoured *Pokémon* for Switch. There are also no plans to overhaul the somewhat convoluted voice-support features, ensuring players still need to struggle with the smartphone app and accompanying cables or look to services such as Discord and Skype to sync up with their friends and teammates.

We've also gotten our first taste of what Nintendo has in store for retro game enthusiasts. The company has all but confirmed that the Virtual Console will not be mak ng a return. Instead, it will look to offer its classics as an incentive to get on board with Switch Online. The service will launch with 20 NES classics, including *Donkey Kong*, *Super Mario Bros 3*, *Ice Climber* and *Tennis*, and some of these titles will even come with brand new online multiplayer options. We aren't going to turn our nose up at free games, particularly if SNES, N64 and GameCube titles begin to join the roster as the years wind on.

"AS WITH EVERYTHING NINTENDO RELATED, ONLY TIME WILL TELL"

Overall, it's difficult to get a full read on what Nintendo is offering here. We always knew that the company would eventually charge for online multiplayer – it has been transparent about that from the start. The offering of free, updated NES games is certainly welcome too, but locking save data backups and the failure to address the flaws in the voice-support systems has us a little worried that Nintendo has still failed to fully grasp the appeal of investing in online survives. Still, as with everything Nintendo related, only time will tell.

THE GAMES THAT WILL MAKE YOU WANT TO SUBSCRIBE TO SWITCH ONLINE



SPLATOON 2

It may have launched last year, but *Splatoon 2* continues to be Nintendo's best online multiplayer game. The developer's continued support has been excellent to see, while the wonderful community that has built up around the game has only ensured that the fun never seems to subside. If you're subscribing to Switch Online, you need to be playing *Splatoon 2*.



SUPER SMASH BROS.

Everybody knows that *Super Smash Bros* is only as good as the people you're playing it with. That's why getting yourself a subscription to Switch Online is going to be mandatory come the launch of *Super Smash* later this year. Details on the ground are light right now, but if history has proven anything it's that this will be yet another epic instalment to the long-running series.



MONSTER HUNTER GENERATIONS ULTIMATE

Arriving 28 August, this Switch exclusive follow-up to *Monster Hunter Generations* is going to be one of the biggest games of the year. While the core fun can indeed be found offline, *Generations Ultimate* will offer online multiplayer with up to three other hunters, and that's something no player should miss out on!

7 THINGS WE'VE LEARNT ABOUT BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2

→ UBISOFT MONTPELLIER OPENS UP A LITTLE ABOUT ITS AMBITIOUS RPG

FORMAT: **PS4, XBOX ONE, PC** | PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**
DEVELOPER: **UBISOFT MONTPELLIER** | RELEASE: **TBC** | PLAYERS: **1-TBC**

The team at Ubisoft Montpellier wants to keep fans of *Beyond Good & Evil* as involved and updated on the development of its sequel as possible and the most recent example of this was a Twitch livestream that offered us some deeper back story to the game, as well as a glimpse of some early gameplay. Development is still early, with even a 2019 release date seemingly too soon to call, but what's there is already very impressive.

We've talked previously about how the game will allow inter-planetary travel without any loading screens, taking you from murky streets to space in a matter of moments, but now we understand a little more about the moments in between. *Beyond Good & Evil 2* will have you living the life of a space pirate with massive ships, space combat, lower-atmosphere combat and PvE combat all happening. And you should be able to hop between these modes as and when you wish depending on the circumstances. We doubt, for instance, that hand-to-hand combat is best utilised in space, but we could be wrong.

Anyway, here are a few key facts and reveals that stood out to us that you will want to be up to speed on as *Beyond Good & Evil 2* creeps ever closer.

IN BRIEF
Michel Ancel returns to the Beyond Good & Evil universe with a RPG concept far more expansive and involved than we could have imagined

SYSTEM 3 FOCUS

1 *Beyond Good & Evil 2* will be focused around a single solar systems called System 3. It is one of five systems that humanity escaped to after an exodus from Earth in the year 2108. The game itself is taking place at some time after 2360, so many, many years after this event. When the different ships went to their respective systems they could no longer stay in contact, so nothing is known about these other populations.

HISTORY IS IMPORTANT

2 Michel Ancel's team is stressing the importance of an in-game history to help inform the decisions they're making about the game world. Their in-house document on this appears to begin around 2040 with the 'Golden Age Of Science' through the creation of hybrids, the colonisation of space and eventually an age of pirates emerging around 2360. That's around when we'll be joining the action.





CREATE-A-CAPTAIN

3 You'll be able to create your own playable character in the game who will also be the captain of your crew as you get a larger ship and begin hiring a team. Your captain can be human or hybrid, and any gender you prefer (the developer seems to be suggesting non-binary options will be available). Your crew is also yours to select, as any characters you meet can be hired and assigned a role.

THERE'S A JADE ANGLE

4 Ubisoft Montpellier remains coy on the relationship of this game to *Beyond Good & Evil*'s lead character Jade, but it has revealed that she is born not long before the events of this game. So, at least in terms of the timeline, the events of this game are before the original, but may overlap with Jade's life a little. What they did confirm is that she's born during a period of great turmoil as the 'Age Of Piracy' begins.

DOOR TO ANOTHER WORLD

5 One of the big mysteries and driving forces behind your story in the game is apparently something called Moshka's Door, a fissure in space that some believe is a gateway to another world or system, and could possibly be the answer to finding a new home for hybrids seeking freedom from their masters in System 3. Hybrids had been the slave workforce that made colonisation possible, but it appears that this is coming to an end.

CLASSIC GAMEPLAY RETURNS

6 Two key gameplay elements of the original game will be returning, which is excellent news. The first is a focus on melee combat, with some incredible motion-capture footage revealing some really fluid and exciting double-bladed staff work. The other element is the photography mechanic, which returns in the form of a kind of spyglass for taking images and scanning for information. A nice little pirate update to keep *BG&E2* in theme.

PLAY WITH FRIENDS

7 The last detail that Ubisoft Montpellier has wanted to stress is that you will be able to play *Beyond Good & Evil 2* any way that you want to. This means it will handle solo play and give you a rich and involving storyline in this format, or you can join or invite friends to team up and crew a ship together, still continuing the epic story you're a part of. This is an action-adventure RPG above all else.

IN BRIEF
PES returns in 2019 with Konami eager to prove that it can surpass FIFA both on and off the pitch.

PES 2019 UNLEASHES THE POWER OF FOOTBALL

→ NEW DETAILS ON KONAMI'S LATEST

FORMAT: **PC, PS4, XBOX ONE** | PUBLISHER: **KONAMI** | DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** | RELEASE: **30 AUGUST 2018** | PLAYERS: **TBC**



CREATE MAGIC MOMENTS

1 *PES 2019* is all about embracing the 'power of football'. Konami failed to explain what this means exactly, but we have to assume it means that *PES* is further leaning into its simulation of the beautiful game. A game of football in *PES 2019* is all about leveraging individual player skills, traits and positioning to create what Konami calls 'Magic Moments' across the pitch.



THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

2 Konami knows what players love about *PES*. The shooting mechanics are being tweaked to better account for ball physics, player and ball position, individual player skills and shot styles. Konami is also bringing 'Visible Fatigue' to the game, a new mechanic that works behind-the-scenes to impact player performance and behaviour the harder you push them.



OVERHAULED GAME MODES

3 *PES* has always threatened to take the fight to its closest rival and Konami is overhauling large portions of myClub and Master League; myClub is receiving a new player card design system, completely changing the way players build out their squads, while Master League will receive a new transfer and negotiation system as well as an improved UX design.



IMPROVED PRESENTATION

4 Konami is overhauling its interface and menu design, which should make navigating the game more intuitive, while *PES 2019* will also introduce 4K HDR support across all platforms to help show off its integration of real-time global illumination, improving everything from lighting to crisper crowd detail, realistic grass textures and weather effects.



WHY I ♥...

LITTLEBIG PLANET

TIM SCHAFER,
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DOUBLE FINE

"I like a lot of games, but one of the games that I thought was really special was LittleBigPlanet. *For years I've tried to make games that celebrate creativity, but I realised when I saw that game that I've mostly been celebrating my creativity and my team's creativity. They [Media Molecule] actually made a game that celebrates everyone's creativity. And not just being a paint program in doing that, but actually a playful experience with so much charm and personality, which is something that I really like."*

"They actually made a game that celebrates everyone's creativity"
TIM SCHAFER, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, DOUBLE FINE


Mm

DICE'S DESIGN DIRECTOR DANIEL BERLIN SITS DOWN WITH GAMESTM TO EXPLAIN HOW A NEW-FOUND EMPHASIS ON SQUADS, TEAMWORK AND COMMUNICATION WILL ENSURE BATTLEFIELD V IS THE BEST ENTRY IN THE LONG-RUNNING SERIES YET

ALL FOR ONE

IN MANY RESPECTS, *Battlefield V* is 16 years in the making. The iconic series may have evolved and broadened in scope significantly in that time, but the focus has never once wavered from celebrating the chaos and drama that can emerge out of all-out tactical warfare. Battlefield has always been praised for its massive multiplayer battles, tantalisingly tactical combat and its ability to strike a clear and transparent balance between its aircrafts, armoured vehicles and small arms firefights. That could be said of *Battlefield 1942*, the series' 2002 debut, and it can be said of DICE's emphatic return to World War II as a historical framing device for its action. So what is it that makes *V* any different, and any more deserving of your time and attention than any other Battlefield game that has come along before it?

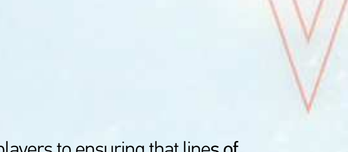
To put it simply enough, DICE is finally at a stage in which it has the apparatus to deliver a Battlefield that is *truly* hinged around cooperation and coordination. While we aren't trying to suggest that team play hasn't been an ever-present part of Battlefield over the years, we would like to posit that it has only ever been a suggested play style rather than a core attraction of the experience – a support mechanism for those too afraid to wander the sprawling sandboxes as a maverick lone wolf.

In *Battlefield V*, DICE is finally leveraging the potential of squads to improve, broaden and solidify the core Battlefield fantasy. The studio is expanding upon its long-held belief that together, a small group of dedicated players can accomplish anything; that by maintaining tight threads of communication and by utilising dynamic squad interactions, players can complete any task and overcome just about any threat that they may encounter across one of Battlefield's tightly contested and ever-shifting frontlines.

Of course, you don't need to take our word for it if you don't want to. It's perhaps DICE's long-serving design director Daniel Berlin that puts it best as we catch him ruminating on how he would like players to best approach *Battlefield V* when it launches this October: "PTFO: Play The Fucking Objective."



Particular attention has been paid to weapon systems and gunplay. DICE wants it so that you can learn the weapons, getting a proper sense of recoil and spread. It has worked to make the first few shots with a weapon predictable, giving players more control over shot placement.



Battlefield V is taking the action back to World War II and is set to launch on 19 October 2018 for PC, PS4 and Xbox One. If you're eager, you can get it a little earlier, EA Origin/Access and Deluxe Edition owners are being granted entry to the frontlines on the 11 October.

YOU ARE REQUIRED TO DEPEND ON YOUR SQUAD MATES MORE SO THAN IN PREVIOUS BATTLEFIELD TITLES

'PTFO' has long been the unofficial mantra of the disgruntled Battlefield player. DICE is taking steps to eradicate it from the lexicon of Battlefield, but that is, of course, far easier said than done. There is, after all, simply no accounting for how an individual player may decide to approach any given situation, let alone whether they will want to work in tandem with another group of players, even in a game so inherently focused around teamwork as Battlefield.

While every round should indeed be a tense war of attrition, with 64 players bouncing off of one another in an attempt to gain forward momentum and shift the dynamic of play, that isn't always the case. And don't you sit there pretending that you haven't seen the Battlefield fantasy collapse in front of your eyes time and time again. Too often, games devolve into chaotic scenes of thinly veiled Team Deathmatch as the objective zones remain largely uncontested, causing rounds to slowly draw to a wholly unsatisfying conclusion. Squads have been used for little more than speedy respawn re-entry points rather than an extension of your tactical capabilities or vocabulary. And so it's here where DICE is making some key changes that, the studio believes, could in fact make this the best Battlefield experience ever – the most faithful to that core Battlefield fantasy DICE has spent 16 years working towards fully realising.





"We want you to play together with a squad. We're always incentivising that. That's the mentality going through the entire game. This is a squad-based game; you should play together with your squad," says Berlin, highlighting a key area of focus throughout *Battlefield V*'s lengthy production. "We're adding additional ways for squads to actually play together. We're increasing the amount of dependency between players… you are required to depend on your squad mates more so than in previous Battlefield titles."

With *Battlefield V*'s multiplayer action once again cast out across huge sandbox areas, the potential for uninhibited and emergent play is indeed massive. DICE hands players incredible tools, systems and mechanics to work with one another in service of finding victory, but it has never quite found a way to drive players to work together naturally.

Properly incentivising squad play is right at the top of DICE's mission statement for *Battlefield V.* That means some pretty big changes are on the way, and it all stems from the composition of squads, underpinned by the thought that if the studio can get this dynamic right, then players will naturally fall into cooperative play and playing the objective as the standard. "The general mentality here is that we want to make sure that squads are ever-present, meaning that when you're in a squad, you stay together and you play together, no matter where you go and how you do it," notes Berlin, who explains that every time you join a match in *Battlefield V* you will immediately find yourself surrounding by other players and put into a position of relative responsibility. "You will never be put in a position that you are not in a squad. If you want to lone wolf it you can do that; that's possible, but it has to be an active choice for you as a player."

Berlin says that DICE has approached *Battlefield V* in a very particular way, designed to quickly get players into the mindset that they are playing as part of a small, autonomous team within a larger company, as opposed to a solo player merely surrounded by others that might steal your kills or get in your way. He notes that the team has put considerable time into reaffirming that squad play is the signature mark of the Battlefield series. This works on a variety of levels, from increasing dependency between players to ensuring that lines of communication are never broken.

It's as he says: "While you're in a squad, we want you to be able to communicate at all times; if you're on a loading screen, if you're in the lobby, or if you're in-between matches, you will be able to chat and VOIP. We're never going to be cutting the communication between squads, they always stay together."

This all comes back to that concept we mentioned before, of making each squad autonomous units within the larger whirlpool of action happening on a map at any one given time. Every multiplayer match will be bound by the duelling concepts of scarcity and attrition; spawn into a round, and you'll immediately notice that you aren't dropping onto the battlefield with a full complement of munitions. It's up to individual players to assess the situation in front of them and to then make a tactical decision on how to proceed ahead. "This is a big addition for us," Berlin teases. "We're introducing a concept called scarcity. Now, what this means is we're gonna make you somewhat reduced in terms of what you carry the second you spawn in; you're gonna have somewhat less ammo and you're gonna have somewhat less explosives."

The idea isn't to make you less of an immediate threat, but to push players into being more aware of their surroundings and an active participant in the unfolding theatre of war. Call Of Duty or Titanfall this is not – running and gunning will only get you so far, and every action in *Battlefield V* should be made with some consideration to the reaction it will incur. "If you just want to dash into combat you're still going to be capable enough, if you're a skilled player. If you want to get straight into a firefight you can do just that, but if you're successful – meaning that you get one, two or maybe three kills – you're going to find yourself in a situation where you're actually out of ammo."

"We want to introduce a sense of mindfulness. A meta-game where you're mindful of your resources at all times," he continues, noting that this will also lead to increased longevity for player life and a more dynamic playing experience. That classic Battlefield high-octane action is still present and accounted for, only now it'll be more thrilling and concussive than ever. At the very least, that's the plan.

"The gameplay – in terms of when you're in action, when you're running and gunning – all of that is still the same fast-paced gameplay that you've come to expect. But what we want to do, in terms of the tempo, is create lulls. We want there to be ups and downs. For the game to go up in intensity, you know, where you fight, fight, fight, fight, fight, and *then* there's a moment of pause where you actually need to re-supply and you get ready for the next encounter. You have time to be tactical

and you have time to plan out attacks. The game becomes a more dynamic experience as a result."

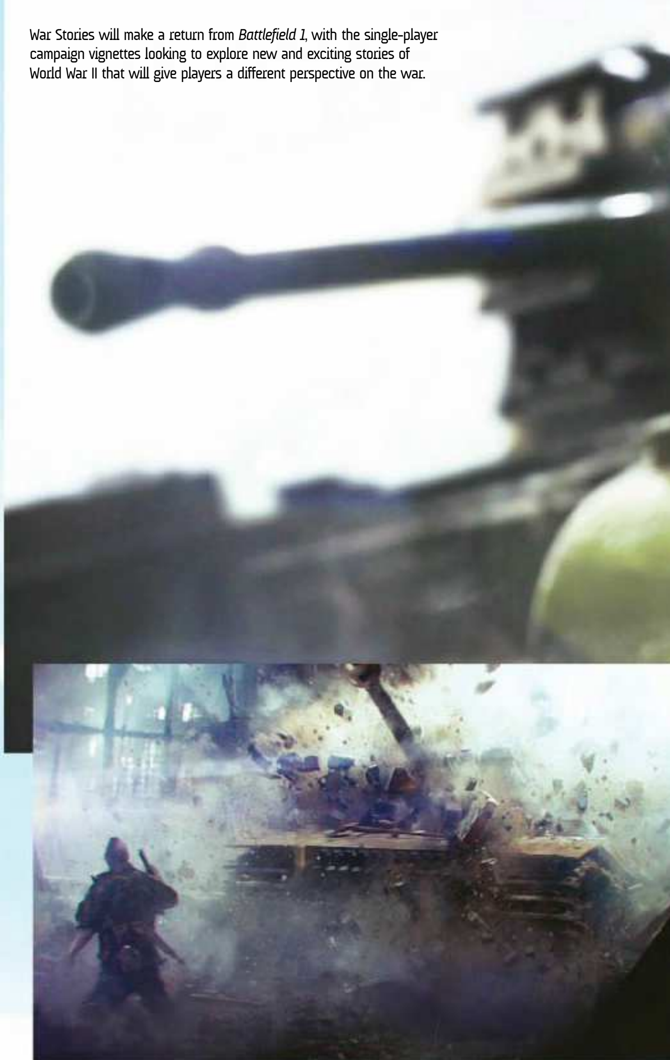
Berlin is keen to stress that none of this is coming at the detriment of the core proficiencies of play. In fact, if anything, it's a counterweight to other areas of the game that are being streamlined. Destruction and fortifications – which we will get to eventually, trust us – create a whole new dynamic to play, while traversal and movement has also been overhauled in order to help improve immersion and tactility.

It's the small details here that really impress, such as the ability to run full throttle at a window and smash right through it without skipping a beat. The days of having to slowly unlatch a closed window before then being allowed to tepidly vault out it after you spot a Panzer tank careering towards the building you're stationed in are long gone. The tempo is far more energetic than in past Battlefield games. Still, we digress (it's all too easy to get caught up on the little details here). It's this shift to the pace of *Battlefield V* and the introduction of scarcity where we see how the game is subtly pushing players to naturally and instinctively stick with their squads rather than wander off as soon as they spawn back into the game.

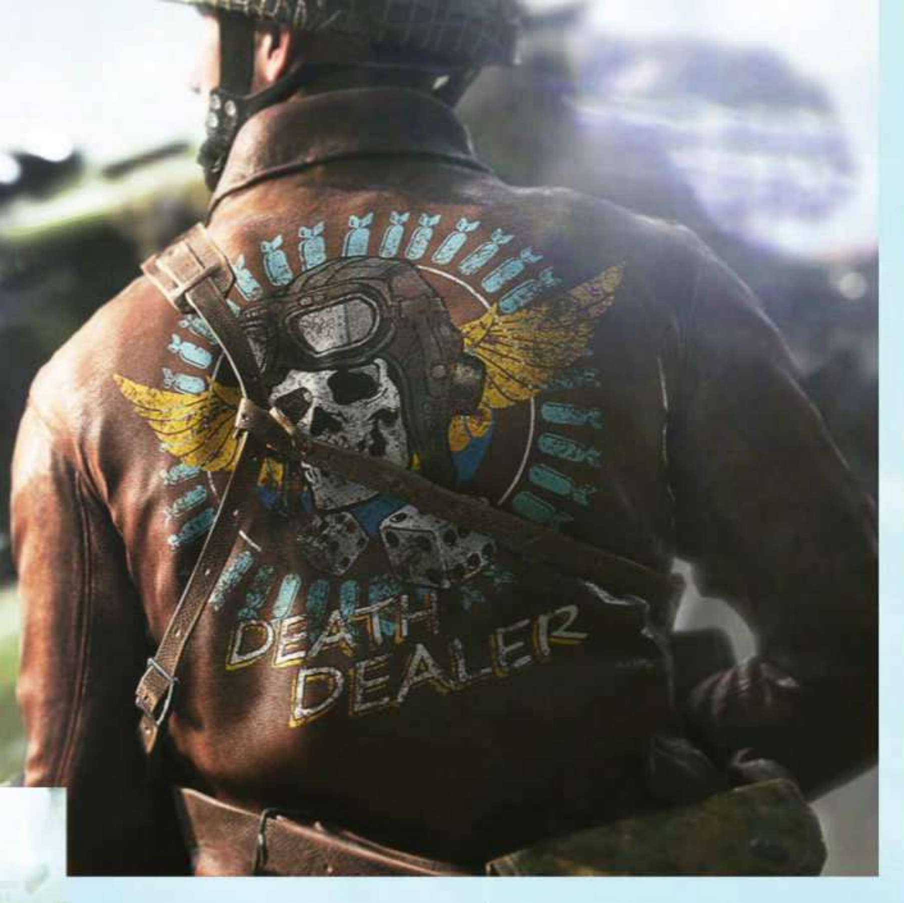
You will be dependent on your squad to survive, let alone thrive. Making each and every player dependent on one another automatically incentivises teamwork and cooperation, pushing players to actually engage in that style of play. Take, for example, ammunition. You'll still be able to rely on your Support squad member to dish out ammo pouches, but you'll now also find two other avenues of replenishment in the form of re-supply stations and ammo drops. All enemies will now drop limited ammunition that can be used to help you get out of a tight spot, but picking them up is also a slow and risky endeavour. So too is approaching the re-supply stations found in key locations across the map due to a newfound sense of physicality in *Battlefield V*.

"The re-supply stations will replenish ammo, they will replenish explosives and gadgetry, and they will replenish health," Berlin says, noting that other players can in fact destroy these stations, though they can be later rebuilt by Support players through the new fortification system. "Also, together with these re-supply stations, every enemy that you shoot is actually gonna drop ammunition. It's gonna be up to players to consider the risk-reward, to make that choice and think, 'Hey, I'm out of ammo, I just shot these two guys, should I dash in there and loot them for ammo, or do I want to stay in the safety of cover?"

Why is this a big decision to be made? Because of that physicality we were just talking about. DICE is removing what Berlin calls "abstractions" from the game in an effort to help gate the shifting pace of matches and to give players a physical sense of dependency on those around them. "The [ammo drops] is something you physically move up to and interact with. This game is moving away from abstractions as a whole. You don't move close to a med pack and then get healed by a magical aura anymore; you actually have to move up to



War Stories will make a return from *Battlefield 1*, with the single-player campaign vignettes looking to explore new and exciting stories of World War II that will give players a different perspective on the war.



it, grab the meds and then apply them. Auras are gone. Abstractions are gone. It's a physical game now."

It's easiest to understand this shift when you consider the role and impact of the Medic. This has the potential to be one of the most controversial changes to Battlefield's core gameplay, though it's one that has been a long, *long* time coming. "You can't just flick a syringe in the sky and revive eight people in a row," laughs Berlin as he explains the shift in mentality to the revive mechanic. "This is a physical interaction now. You actually move up to the person that you're going to be reviving; you pull out a syringe, you stab them with it, and you physically pull them up. As the person that's down, you'll see the face of the player that's rescuing you – you'll see their visual customisation and how they have built their character," he says, adding: "It creates a much more personal and immersive connection."

That physical interaction also has some cool payoffs for moment-to-moment gameplay, such as the ability to actually move downed players in your squad out of trouble while you look for an opportunity to pick them up off the ground. "Say you're on The End or Locker or something," says Berlin, dealing in current-map hypotheticals, "and your buddy is downed in an alleyway of death. What you can now do – instead of going in there and trying to revive him, surrounded by gunfire – is you can actually walk up to them, grab them, and then pull them into cover and revive them in safety."

It's awesome is what that is. How it works in practice – well, it's too early to say, but we love the idea. It's a small example of how DICE is looking to make this a more visceral and reactive experience, where treating your fellow squad mates with the attention they deserve can actually create these really dynamic and cinematic moments that are usually reserved for action movies.

Still, lets bring the focus back to classes. It's interesting because, much like Support, the Medic is seeing such a huge increase in responsibility. Embodying the role of the Medic is more important than ever before, and carries with it new lines of pressure, though they are also seeing some duties taken off of their shoulders to ease the stress too. In an intriguing move, every player in a squad can now revive every other player in their particular squad, regardless of their chosen class. It's still only Medics that can revive a soldier to full health, but a "buddy revive" will give you the opportunity to pick a squad member up off the floor and give you some additional support until proper reinforcements arrive. DICE is effectively making it so that a tight squad can survive anything if they work together and communicate properly.

"[Buddy revives] take a long time, and it's limited to the people within your squad, but

FORTIFICATIONS IS YOUR ABILITY, IN BATTLEFIELD V, TO ACTUALLY RE-BUILD AND SHAPE THE BATTLEFIELD



★★★★

BUILD THINGS UP, DON'T BREAK THEM DOWN

★★★★

DICE has always been stuck in a bit of a hard place. Fans have long been asking for the large-scale destruction of the Battlefield Bad Company games, and so it followed through, delivering just that in *Battlefield 1*. Of course, fans then complained that entire maps could be levelled, creating blank, flat spaces that were uninteresting to navigate. S, how is DICE responding? By bringing in buildable fortifications.

"Fortifications is your ability, in *Battlefield V*, to actually rebuild and shape the battlefield," reveals design director Daniel Berlin. "You can build anything that is a military fortification or a military asset in this game. Meaning there's sandbags, barbwire, tank stoppers, foxholes, trenches, machine guns… these are just some of the things that the players can now actually build."

It's really impressive, and just another way in which DICE is making this year's Battlefield something of a unique experience. Fortifications are available for every player in the game, each of them spawning in with a toolkit – not unlike how every player had a gas mask in *BF1* – and are able to dip into a shared resource pool to then attempt to rebuild levelled buildings, bring in gun emplacements and establish cover. Support players will be the fastest of the classes at building, and will also have access to some special build items, such as more powerful gun emplacements and the ability to craft re-supply stations. "I think this is one of the biggest additions that really, really changes how *Battlefield V* plays compared to previous Battlefield titles for sure," teases Berlin, and you don't know the half of it!

What we're excited to see in action is how players will begin to play with the tools at their disposal and begin to re-shape the action and battlefields available to them. Berlin revealed one such scenario, and it sounds, well, ridiculous – in the best possible way. "Another thing we're adding is the ability for you to tow stationary weapons. You can actually just take a vehicle and back it up to a stationary AA gun or a stationary field gun, latch it on, and then you can drive away with it. That adds on to the fortification gameplay," adds Berlin. "You couple the fortifications you build with the position of your stationary weapons as well."

Oh, and the best bit? Yes, of course the stationary weapons can be utilised as they are being towed. "You can do that, yes! You can be in a tank and you can grab a portable AA gun, your friend can jump into that AA gun and shoot it simultaneously as you are driving," laughs Berlin. It sounds fantastic, and we can't wait to see how players utilise this *and* rally together to take down ludicrous combinations that everyone else comes up with. "You can kinda build this little micro train; you can basically be in a Tiger with an AA, dominating the sky, and dominating the battlefield as well."



APPETITE FOR DESTRUCTION

Honestly, the first time we saw *Battlefield V* in action (before we had any concrete information) we were immediately lulled into believing that we might indeed be seeing the return of Battlefield Bad Company. It wasn't only the buoyant tone that the trailer struck, but the destruction. The sweet, beautiful destruction. *Battlefield V* will feature highly destructible environments, with weapons and vehicles able to literally tear them apart dynamically. It looks incredible.

"We've completely revamped the destruction system," *Battlefield V* design director Daniel Berlin explains. "Meaning that it's actual parts of the building that you see collapse, crack and then actually fall apart. It's much more dynamic, and it's different every time."

This is because the destruction engine is entirely physics based, with DICE sinking considerable effort into getting rid of the pre-determined animations of old. Not only does it look fantastic, but it also has gameplay implications – debris tracks in the direction of destruction, meaning you'll be able to get a sense of which rooms gunfire is coming from outside by seeing which walls are being riddled with bullet holes.

So how does it work in practice? Let's hand it over the Berlin: "If, for example, I'm sitting in a tank and I shoot a projectile inside a house, an explosion will happen inside the house. You'll see the parts fly out. You're actually going to see it over a longer period of time. You'll see an explosion happen first, the fire coming out, and then the wall cracks, then pieces of wall will fly out, and then there will be secondary debris coming out, and then the things falling out of the sky. You'll actually have pieces of the house left hanging that will collapse over time 'cause of the weights of those pieces. Of course, if you're standing under those you're gonna eventually get hit, and then you might fuckin' die."

it's part of the mentality that we want to push. We want to keep people playing together with their squad, so you should be able to maintain yourself within a squad and keep a squad alive. That's a super-important thing because of the squad dynamic in this game," Berlin says, although he is keen to stress that this isn't done in an effort to make the Medic less viable. "This is not to diminish the value of the medic. The medic can still revive anyone, and they can do super-quick revives. Plus, once they revive you, you're also back to maximum health."

Ah yes, the health situation. We foresee this one kicking up a storm come October, but we are in agreement with DICE; it feels like a necessary change to help support the style of cooperative game the studio wants players to pursue. "Another thing that is interesting here is that no longer in Battlefield will you be able to fully replenish your health. You cannot fully regen to 100 per cent health in *Battlefield V* on your own. That's something that you need to actually look to your teammates to do," says Berlin, giving us just a small hint as to how the role of the medic is being enriched. While resupply stations can be used to take you back to full strength, they will of course be high-risk danger zones due to their huge utility benefit. Instead, you'll need to look towards the medic to keep on top of the overall health and strength of the squad they have been charged with protecting – the improved level of responsibility will drive them to fulfil the role too, believe us on that one.

"All of this opens up player choice. I'd say, in previous games, you spawn and then you're in an encounter and then you're behind a rock, and then you wait for 10 seconds as your health goes up to 100. You always have a good amount of ammo on you anyway, so your tactics don't change and the situation doesn't change, but in this game that exact scenario is going to go differently. If you're sitting behind a rock after you've been in an engagement you'll think, 'Hmm, I'm running low on ammo, and my health is not at max, and I'm not gonna get anything back by sitting here, so I need to change my tactics. I need to



DICE has made a bunch of really small, but pretty cool, changes to the movement systems. You can now throw yourself from a sprint into a prone position with more control and intensity, and you can also roll over when prone to be on your back instead of your belly.

Battlefield V won't feature any premium loot boxes, and the Premium Pass is out too. This is done in an effort to keep squads together, and so all players will have access to the same maps and the same modes. There's no gating to be done here.

look to my friends, to have dependency on my squad-mates."

It's important for DICE to make being a part of a squad feel important and impactful, regardless of whether you are playing with friends or have just dropped into a game via matchmaking. In an effort to foster this feeling of camaraderie between perfect strangers, *Battlefield V* will feature a brand new respawn flow.

When you are mortally wounded the camera will zoom into the soldier or vehicle that killed you before darting back to your own bloody, covered body, giving you the opportunity to scream out for medical attention while surveying the situation with 360 degrees of control. Should you bleed out you'll immediately be put over the shoulder of one of your squad mates, cycling through them in an effort to decide where and when to spawn – letting you choose where you can be most helpful, be it laying down suppressing fire, dropping ammunition, or popping open the syringe pack to help bring another back into the fight.

"You don't actually go back through the Deploy Screen when you die. Again, this is designed to incentivise squads; play with your squad and stay with your squad," Berlin insists, although he is also keen to stress that you *can* still access the Deploy screen if you want to, giving you the opportunity to spawn at friendly objective marker, in a vehicle, or back at the main base. But, he insists, it's by dropping behind a squad member's shoulder where you'll be most effective. "You get that type of instant awareness like, 'What is my squad doing? What point are they attacking? Are they in combat?' and I can see it all, instantly. If they're in combat I'm like, 'Ah, that's why I can't spawn in,' and it's not just an icon blinking on the Deploy screen. It always comes back to that mentality, to stay with your squad and play with your squad right to the end."

That's a dour and important note for Berlin to pause on. Once a squad is wiped out they will have to work incredibly hard to regain the ground that they have lost. DICE anticipates that we will see huge and dramatic swings in the position of frontlines in *Battlefield V* thanks to how damaging a full squad wipe can be to the wider team effort. "As an enemy, that's gonna be my goal: to take out the full squad. If you are that last surviving squad member it's going to be very important that you stay alive at this point… when you get a squad wipe, you know that you've knocked that *entire* squad out from this position. They're now back at the Deploy screen, and they're gonna be pushed back to whatever point they can re-spawn on."

IT'S SUPER IMPORTANT TO WORK WITH YOUR SQUAD BECAUSE THE STAKES ARE SO HIGH. WHEN YOU'RE DONE, YOU ARE DONE

Of course, those that do take to working with their squad mates will also find other advantages presented to them. One of the most impressive of these are Squad Reinforcements, which Berlin promises are: "a reward that we give to squads that play together."





DICE is introducing an extensive live game component in the form of Tides Of War. Character progression and customisation is going to be a huge part of the experience of *Battlefield V*, with almost every element of the uniform and weapons completely customisable.

"Executing squad play commands – such as reviving, executing orders, giving ammo and spawning on each other – or PTFO; if you play the objective you'll also get squad reinforcement points," he continues. These points go towards unlocking some of *Battlefield V*'s most potent utility items, vehicles and weapons, and they sound positively terrifying. "What this does is give you access to items like the V1 Rocket… It doesn't matter how bad the situation is around you, if you drop that V1, everybody fucking goes away," he says, laughing. "We also have super-powerful powerhouse vehicles that are built for your entire squad to fit inside and play together. You can call these types of vehicles in, and they are only for your squad to spawn into. This has the same mentality; if this thing comes at you and you aren't geared to deal with it, you aren't playing a class leaning towards taking out vehicles, then you should just leave, because it will kill everyone.

"It's something you get for team play and for playing with your squad. This is important. You will not be able to get access to these by basically doing the lone wolf thing. These are rewards for squad players, for players that play the objective," he notes, and it isn't the only thing designed for players willing to PTFO.

Every change that DICE is making to *Battlefield V* leads to its spectacular new starring game mode, Grand Operations. All of the studio's feverish attempts to create an environment in which players are naturally pushed into cooperation and coordinated play is in service of this game mode that turns up the heat on players with fixed objectives and drawn-out campaigns with a strict end challenge that will really test your skills.

Operations were, without question, one of the best things to emerge out of *Battlefield 1*, and they are back, redesigned in response to feedback from the community and the next step in fostering large-scale multiplayer action. "You probably had the experience in *Battlefield 1* where you're playing, for example, on the map Montee Grappa [as part of the Iron Walls Operation] and you are stuck on the first section for an hour and that was… not great," admits Berlin, explaining that DICE is "changing the format completely" in response.

Grand Operations are more varied and complete historical re-enactments than anything that we saw in *Battlefield 1*. Massive 64-player engagements that will play out over the course of three or four individual matches, with each of them representing a different day of the battle – the win conditions and game modes shifting between each scenario, all of it tied together by an over-arching narrative. "We want you to be continuously engaged in the operation from start to finish" Berlin tells us, before giving us an example as to how this may play out. It's fascinating, to say the least.

One Grand Operation teased sees 32 players dropping into Rotterdam as paratroopers, an invasion force attempting to secure ground and take out artillery cannons, while the other 32 are cast as defenders. That's day one of the engagement, and the results of it will have sweeping impacts on the subsequent ones to come. "Based on how many artillery placements you were able to take out will directly impact how many soldiers are actually available for you to respawn as tickets during the next day. It also impacts things like what types of vehicles you'll have available to you, and this is custom for every Operation that we set up."

These Grand Operations are limited-time events, but they are the perfect personification of what Battlefield can offer when it is at its best. There's nothing like this experience available in the FPS scene right now, and it's simply awesome to behold. It only works because of the changes made to squad interaction and Battlefield's new-found physicality. Sticking with your team, working and playing together in service of the larger effort, isn't just suggested; it is literally necessary to succeed.

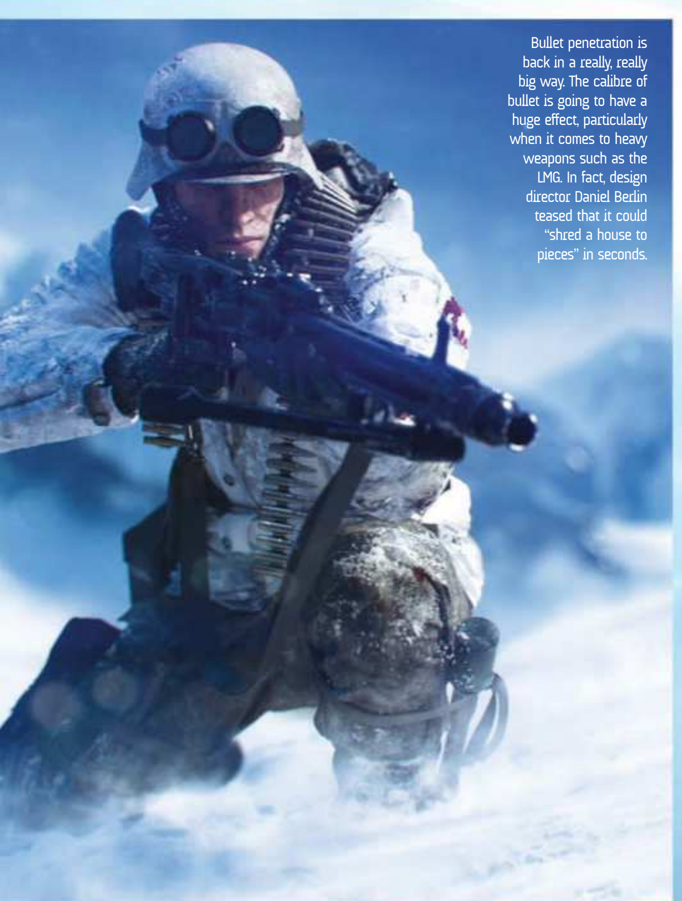
As the days progress through one of these Grand Operations, resources and respawns will continue to deplete, and by the time you reach the final part of it, the Final Stand, it'll be a literal fight to the death. You'll start the round with just one clip of ammo, and there will be no ticketed respawns remaining. It's going to brutal and punishing, a tense affair that pushes Battlefield's systems and setup to the limit. "You spawn in, and we lean *heavily* into the attrition system here," teases Berlin. "This is it: you've got one life and you fight down to the very last man. Imagine it, you've been investing in this Operation for an hour-plus, and now it's down to this gruesome fight. A fight for resources and a fight for survival. We can even crank up the dynamic weather, which makes a return from *Battlefield 1* into *Battlefield V*, and we can really lean into the drama and intensity here."

"The Squad play becomes so much important here because yes, you don't have any respawns, but there is the Buddy Revive, and there are Medics. Yes, you don't have any ammo, but there are Supports, and they can resupply you," continues Berlin. "And the medic becomes super important here because, remember, you can't fully heal on your own, so you'll need them to heal you up. And you know that when you kill an enemy and you see 'squad wipe' pop up on your screen, they aren't just back to the Deploy screen; they are *out of the entire Operation!* The entire squad is done for the entire Operation. It's super important to work with your squad because the stakes are so high. When you're done, *you are done.*

Honestly, it sounds stressful, intense, and absolutely brilliant. Grand Operations is the mode that brings everything together. It's the mode that makes sense of *Battlefield V*'s concentration on squads and the trust DICE is putting in its player base to follow through with the fantasy. It reflects Battlefield at its best, as the culmination of 16 years of iteration and evolution. With so many changes made in service of PTFO, of squad play and intuitive cooperation, we can't help but feel like *Battlefield V* will truly deliver on its ambition of fully realising the chaos and drama that can stem from all-out tactical warfare. It's making all of the right moves to achieve that goal.







Bullet penetration is back in a really, really big way. The calibre of bullet is going to have a huge effect, particularly when it comes to heavy weapons such as the LMG. In fact, design director Daniel Berlin teased that it could "shred a house to pieces" in seconds.

WORDS WITH THE CREATOR

Why was it so important for DICE to put such a strong emphasis on team and squad play?

DANIEL BERLIN, DESIGN DIRECTOR: At DICE, we play Battlefield a lot. We have our own setups, we have our own matches, and people stay late in the evenings to play their own game. We are fans of the game ourselves. Improved squad play is something that we talk about so much internally, so this time around we thought we should make it true – for real this time. The good thing about this is that it rings true with the community as well. We listen to the community so much, and so it's something that we feel we want to infuse the game with even more. It seems to be something that resonates with the players as well, so it's just like this magical match. So let's make it happen, you know?

Every time we add new systems to increase the dynamic nature of the sandbox… it's a process. We have to test these things rigorously. When it comes to this type of stuff, we don't just do internal testing; we do external too. We bring people in, we have one iteration, we go back, and we reiterate. It's just a process every time, and 'iteration' is the key word here. I can tell you from personal experience, you do not nail this shit on the first try. You have to just continuously keep pushing.

How easily do you think integral new elements like Buddy Revives will be picked up by players?

It's something we're introducing to increase the squad-play and the physicality to revive. To get the immersion, to introduce something new we have to, again, iterate and then make sure, "Hey, how does this interaction work? How do we put it in front of the players so they can actually learn it?" But I think also, one of the great things we're doing here is that we're introducing the co-op mode. Combined Arms will be a place for players to actually be able to move in an online environment – be able to actually play together with your friends and with a squad – but you're doing it against AI. So you can actually practice being in a squadron environment that isn't necessarily so competitive.

We understand you're completely overhauling how spotting is handled?

Yes, we are completely reworking how the spotting system works, which means that you will no longer be able to just look over a field or an area and just go spot, spot, spot, spot, spot, see like a fuck-ton of icons and then just shoot at the icons. You'll actually have to look at the world, you won't be able to do that type of scanning and then find icons and shoot at them. This game is shooting at actual soldiers using the world around you as your reference point. So no more shooting at icons, basically.

This has been a part of Battlefield for years, why change it now?

I would love to tell you details, but… I can tell you, like, in general. So I was actually thinking about how I was playing Battlefield. I noticed that if I was sitting on my Xbox One or sitting at a PC – particularly when I was holding a controller – my finger wasn't resting on the trigger; it was resting on the spotter. And I thought, "That's weird, why am I doing that?" It's because that's the first action I do. I don't know if everyone does that, but I did that. I turn around, I spot, and *then* I shoot! Which meant that I started losing engagement because some other people were just shooting me directly.

But the general mentality is that since we're saying that this is a physical inter-connected game, we really need to make sure that you're reading the world and you're not reading the UI. It becomes so much more immersive if you are not just shooting at icons, but you're shooting at soldiers too… and now with our additional emphasis on player customisation, visual customisation, we want you to look at the person you're shooting at.

The reveal has struck quite a playful tone, which sreflects the way players have been playing BF 4 *and* BF 1*. Is that a tone that resonates through the entire game experience?*

In terms of style and tone, I think it is on par with the multiplayer experience that is Battlefield. Because of the dynamic nature of Battlefield, it delivers that type of experience when you go like, "What the fuck's going on over there? There's a guy sitting on the wing!" That's the fun of Battlefield and the sandbox of Battlefield. That's what we really want to get back to the fun nature of the game… because it's a game, you know?

Yes, we are inspired by World War II, and that's our setting. But I mean, at the end of the day, it is an entertainment product. We want people to play this and go through the types of war and go on that journey for a long time, and to be able to maintain and engage players in that, we need it to be fun.



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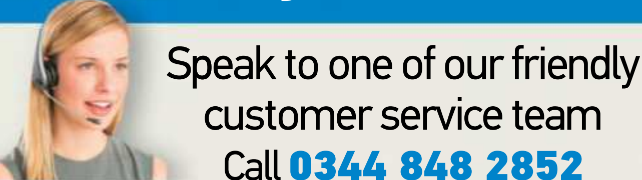
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#PUREPARTY

Afterparty

Night School Studio made a name for itself with supernatural thriller Oxenfree, but now the team is leaving all of that behind to go dancing with the devil in Afterparty



We've all been there, right? Besieged by a hangover so physically and emotionally crippling that all you're able to do is yearn for the sweet relief of eternal sleep. The memories of the night before thankfully fleeting; injuries from the night before alarmingly excruciating; both immortalised by the lens of a camera phone, the evidence already circulating around the internet. God bless social media. Alcohol is trash and only garbage people drink it… you know that you've repeated that thought before. You're never drinking again, this will be the *last time* that you feel this way. You've shouted that into the void before too. But it's okay; we're all friends here. We both know that it's only the last time until the next time.

Night School Studio's latest independent project is an exploration of just that. Of dealing with the world's worst hangover by embarking on the pursuit of another, a hangover that could quite literally be the difference between life and death. At its heart, *Afterparty* is a coming-of-age story starring Lola and Milo, two college students that wake up dead after a bender that went very much awry, unable to remember all that much of the night before. But they are resilient, quickly coming to understand that they have but one chance to escape the quite-literal hellscape that has befallen them before it consumes them entirely.

What if the only way to reclaim your soul, to earn safe passage back to the land of the living, was to school Satan in a demonic contest of alcohol retention? Well, you know what they say: when it's time to party we will party hard. If it sounds ridiculous, that's because it absolutely, unashamedly is. "Yeah, we wanted to take a pretty hard left from what *Oxenfree* was," laughs Sean Krankel, co-founder of the studio and co-creative director of *Afterparty*. "*Oxenfree* was fairly serious with a dash of humour, and I think that *Afterparty* is kind of the flip. It's still an adventure, but it's a funnier take that still has some seriousness within it."

"When *Afterparty* begins you think you're still at a college party," Krankel says of the story. "Then the walls fall away and you're being mocked by demons who are actually pulling a prank. It's sort of like a low-budget play of your last night out," he laughs, before giving us just a little insight into the weird and wonderful world you'll inhabit. "As it turns out you're late to getting processed because of this, so you're told to head down the road to go to what is basically the DMV… except, you know, you're in actual hell now."

It's here where you get your first taste of the off-kilter version of hell that Night School has created. "You get assigned your own personal demon, one that is born from a bunch of choices that you will make in that moment. And this personal demon is sort of like Death in *Bill & Ted's Bogus Adventure*. Kind of a frenemy. Somebody who is there to torture you and drudge up the awful parts of your past but is also along with you for the ride."

Just as you're about to receive your marching orders, an eternity of personalised torture, you're saved by the bell. "Right at the moment you're about to get your sentence it becomes quitting time for the people that work there, and they're like, 'okay, be back here tomorrow at 9:00am,'" he tells us. "We ran with the idea that these demons and humans are all going to know each other for all eternity and, *sure*, their relationship is going to be pretty awful, but what happens over time when that becomes the norm?"

"They end up coexisting there in a way that's a little strange! They're not immediately best friends, »

obviously, but they have a contentious relationship – the demons aren't having a blast torturing these people for eternity either. So we decided that it would be kind of funny if at 6:00pm it was quitting time in hell," says Krankel. "At night the demons and the humans can blow off some steam and go party together, with everybody heading out the door together. And what do you do at quitting time? You all head to the pub."

He isn't wrong on that one. The pub is where enemies can become friends, where differences can be cast aside and where life can be breathed into the misadventures of a lifetime. What follows is the ultimate pub crawl. A game focused around Lola and Milo dipping between demonic dive bars and challenging the denizens to a variety of drinking contests and challenges in an effort to gain entry into one of Satan's legendary house parties.

With the clock ticking, the duo will have to act fast and live steadfastly with the decisions that they make and the missed opportunities that they encounter along the way. "You've basically got, like, ten hours to get this done," Krankel tells us, noting that while it doesn't technically play out in real-time, the game will run for around ten hours. "*Oxenfree* had a far more linear story, and that's very different to *Afterparty*. This game quickly opens up, you can choose how you take all of this on."

"We just knew we had to make the game where you're drinking with Satan"

Ten hours to secure your freedom, insurmountable odds to overcome and a kegger that you can only gain access to by outlasting some of the underworld's most seasoned drinkers. How on earth did Night School go from developing a spooky supernatural thriller to the ultimate party simulator? It certainly hasn't been easy.

Arriving at a place in which Krankel and the team felt comfortable tackling something of the scope and size of Lola And Milo's Excellent Adventure – as we posit it should have been titled from the beginning – has been a challenge for Night School. This sophomore effort would be a challenging undertaking for any independent studio, but it was a necessary one for Night School as it looks to establish the foundations of its future. "It's been difficult and it's been messy, a year of us trying to sort through what the *right* next project for us would be."

"I think, initially, you know, *Oxenfree* and Night School were just so synonymous with one another," Krankel tells us. "We didn't really think of Night School as a company so much as it was more of a collection of people making *Oxenfree*. So, when we were done with it, it was sort of like, well, what's next?"

Figuring that out began with the team attempting to work out what the core principles of the studio would and should be. That's an important step, particularly as Night School has tripled in size from four to twelve in just four years. The team is settling into an evolving creative dynamic while simultaneously attempting to work out which elements of *Oxenfree* should be iterated upon and what needs to be thrown out and started anew. It was, by all accounts, the source of much anxiety for the studio as *Afterparty* began to take shape.

Krankel was eager to avoid Night School becoming known as the studio that exclusively dealt in spooky stories starring teenagers, but he *was* keen to pursue varied storytelling mechanics and interesting narratives to complement them. The broad goal was, as he puts it, "to come up with new types of mechanics and a brand new type of story," but how the team approached that wasn't set in stone. That's how *Oxenfree* came into being, and it's how *Afterparty*'s conception and development was approached, too.

"In the case of *Oxenfree*, we built that story as the mechanics came together. That idea of being isolated on an island, that idea of dealing with the ghost via the radio, that all came out of the mechanics first because we are, you know, a game studio," Krankel continues, chuckling. "And so the same thing happened here with *Afterparty*… the main thing that we knew we wanted to continue to iterate and expand upon was our real-time fluid-dialogue system. That was something that we thought worked quite well in *Oxenfree*; we spent a lot of time building tools for it and we know that it's a good foundation for telling almost any kind of story. And so the bigger question became, well, what kind of story do we tell next?"

Chronicling the bar crawl to end all bar crawls was apparently the answer. Krankel is resolute in his determination, convinced that it's the perfect set-up for a narrative-focused adventure. "In some ways, *in many ways*, drinking is kind of a role-playing experience in real life. That idea seemed pretty fun for us to explore."

With this in hand, along with the desire to expand on its excellent fluid-dialogue system, *Afterparty* started coming together pretty quickly. Night School was eager to once again keep the adventure fairly self-contained within a central environment, although it was keen to make it more vibrant and dynamic than *Oxenfree*'s Edwards Island. It's as these elements – the premise, the basic systems and the general setting – began to coalesce that the studio realised it was on to something pretty special. "When we started we were like, 'is there a single setting that we could put you in that a lot of different types of characters would inhabit?' *Papers, Please* was an inspiration for us initially, it helped us realise that there are a lot of various walks of life that can come through a single setting."

"A bar felt great for that. The bar is a place where any traveller and any type of story can exist. Initially we thought the game was just going to be set in one bar and that was what we iterated on for a while," Krankel recalls, noting that it quickly realised it was planning the worst party of all time. "Eventually we realised that being stuck in just one bar would be kind of lame and a little depressing."



Lola will be voiced by *Star Wars: Battlefront II*'s Janina Gavankar, while her partner in crime Milo will be voiced by Khoi Dao, an actor known for voicing a wide variety of characters in anime circles.



Afterparty brings Night School's proficiency with interactive storytelling to a whole new level as it asks you to escape hell by out-drinking the devil. You have just one night to hit the bars, raise your tolerance and challenge the lord of the underworld to a drink off.



In sharp contrast to *Oxenfree*, *Afterparty* has been written as an outlandish comedy. The premise is ridiculous, and so to are the characters that you're going to meet along the way. The studio has sunk considerable time into ensuring that each of the bars are unique and wondrous locales to visit.

He isn't wrong. So, how did Night School circumvent this particular issue? It once again looked towards film for inspiration. If *Oxenfree* was *Poltergeist* by way of *Freaks And Geeks*, then *Afterparty* had a whole different energy and vibe about it. *Bill And Ted's Excellent Adventure*, *Superbad*, *Harold And Kumar Go To White Castle* and just about any film with an Edgar Wright directorial credit ascribed to it. Really, Krankel tells us, "any of these kinds of movies that take you on an adventure that is fairly crazy and set over one night. What's the story behind your craziest night out? That was where the idea led us. It basically turned into a pub crawl from that point onwards."

"It was a way to make the game more unexpected too. A lot of people's favourite nights out are when they go out and party but they don't know how they got from point A to point Z because there were so many left turns throughout the night, you know? And we wanted to create an environment that feels the same way," Krankel considers, adding, "So, those two things kind of came together at the same time. The idea of drinking, at a low-level mechanics perspective, opened up a lot of mechanical opportunities, and then the pub crawl set-up is just stupid and fun. We thought it would be a blast to live in that space for a couple of years while we make the game."

Oxenfree released back in January 2016, and *Afterparty* will have had three years in development by the time its 2019 release window rolls around.



THERE'S NO ESCAPING TWITTER, EVEN IN HELL

What would hell be without its own form of social media? "This is one of those occasions where we liked the idea before we even knew how we were going to do or use it," laughs Krankel of the decision to have the demons of hell subtweeting you every step of the way. "The way it works now is that Bicker [that's the name of Hell's social network] is intended to be pretty passive for the player. It allows them to see an inner monologue of what's happening for the other NPCs on screen without having to delve completely into a new dialogue tree with them."

"On a small level, let's say you're playing beer pong and you totally screw up a shot, a couple tweets might show up in the world that say 'Oh, this human sucks' or whatever it might be," says Krankel, noting that it's going to not only act as a map of your adventure but as a way to gauge how you're being perceived out in the wider world. "It's designed to be very reactive. By the end of the game, there will be a real-time list of all of the events of that night – not only the stuff that you saw, but stuff that was going on out in the world as well. It allows for fun flavour elements, but it also lets you understand what's going on in other parts of the world narratively without having to dive into a menu."



PARTY 'TIL YOU PUKE

Drinking your way out of hell isn't going to be easy. Eternal beings have a high tolerance for alcohol and have, subsequently, developed their own array of hellish cocktails that help take the edge off after a long day of enacting torture. For humans, such as Lola and Milo, there's going to be a little bit of a readjustment period. "There will be drinks that just give you basic liquid courage and those that make you more boisterous and out there than you might have been otherwise. Then there are more specific drinks..." Krankel teases. "There's also a category of very specific off-the-menu drinks that do crazy stuff. You might drink a shot that makes you vomit your conscience up as a little character; that character runs away, crawls up into an air vent and now all of your dialogue choices are suddenly awful."

"The thing is though," Krankel continues, "if you drink too much, there is certainly the risk of blacking out. There's the risk of your dialogue being basically unreadable or your animation state changing so much that you're falling over." That all said, there are some instances where overindulgence isn't just advised, it's practically recommended. "There's one bar you can't even get to unless you black out and wake up in that park," he tells us, laughing. "There are a variety of ways we're combining all this. As you make your way through the game, interacting with the characters – either on smaller side quests or the larger monarch characters – your tolerance will be increasing, and that unlocks new types of drinks at different bars."

From there it'll be up to you to decide how to manage your drinking and the type of interactions it could induce – you can even get through a large portion of the game by barely sipping at your drink, should you so choose, *Afterparty*'s version of *Oxenfree*'s lingering silence. "You have to ask yourself, 'Who do I want to be when I enter this bar?' We want drinking to be like a role-playing mechanic. And I don't mean like a levelling mechanic, I mean literal role playing" Krankel says. "If I walk into a bar and I see that it is full of a bunch of gruff biker demons or something, I might want to order a drink that makes me have more aggressive or more romantic dialogue options. When you have a drink in you, new dialogue choices pop up. There isn't really a right or wrong way to approach any of this."



Drinking games will materialise in pretty smart ways. Beer pong features a brand-new control system, simple enough that the dialogue system can still sit atop of it. Karaoke is a rhythmic version of the dialogue system, with all-new (super weird) songs written by Andrew Rohrmann, who provided the music for *Oxenfree*.

That time has been well spent developing out the world and all of the weird and wonderful characters that inhabit it. While the idea of a monstrous crawl may have been established relatively early on, the decision to take it from the city streets and into the bowels of hell didn't arrive until much later.

It did, in fact, start out as a running joke internally before quickly spiralling into something more concrete. "We just knew we had to make the game where you're drinking with Satan," Krankel laughs. A crazy night out with Satan and his demonic subordinates set the stage for hell as the canvas of the adventure, and it was one that the team quickly leaned into. "That environment allows for an insane amount of different walks of life and stories. We can create our own version of hell, basically... you've got demons that have been there forever and then, on top of that, you've got dead humans there who are all there for a reason. They're going to have crazy stories to tell as well. Some might be serial killers, some might have cheated on their taxes, but everybody is there for a reason.

"I think that was really the biggest – not on a mechanics level but on a narrative level – 'aha' moment for us. We realised that we can kind of treat the afterlife in a Tim Burton kind of way; it can be macabre and fun, and it can still deal with some pretty dark stuff, but we don't need to take ourselves too seriously. All of this kind of just overlapped nicely. The mechanics, the setting and the idea of the bars... they just kind of worked pretty well together."

So, why is this such a monumental challenge when compared with *Oxenfree*? It's because across the ten-hour adventure you are effectively able to shape the narrative around your decisions. Choosing how the pub crawl plays out, with the world itself reacting, expanding and diminishing to your presence and choices. "Did we want to make a game where, by the time you got to the end of it you could go back and 100 per cent every little aspect of it? Meet every character and do every little thing before the final showdown? Or did we want a game where physicality and the choices that you made – not just dialogue-wise but also where you were at various times and which quests you decided to go on – would also close off other ones?

"We ended up more in the latter camp. *Afterparty* is a game where you will not be allowed to see like half of the content of the game," Krankel



Afterparty is scheduled to launch in 2019 for PC. While no other platforms have been announced, it's worth remembering that *Oxenfree* did eventually make it to consoles.

reveals of your first run through the game. "That's because there could be a situation where you choose to visit one bar that's floating on the River Styx but then another one sinks because you didn't get there in time. So, an entire quest line could be gone."

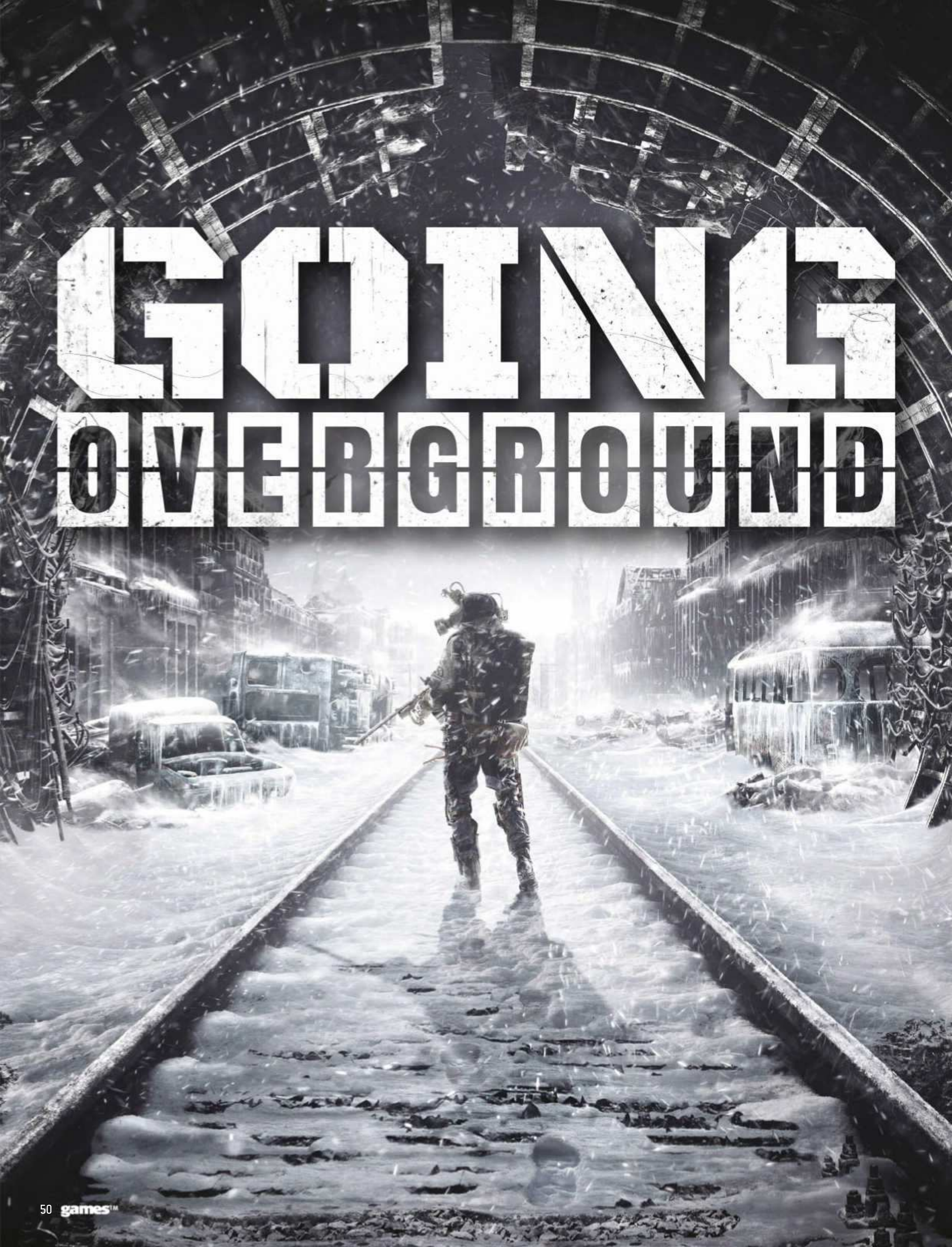
"But there's also a clear, like, macro-level narrative happening for Milo and Lola," says Krankel of the events that transpire in the ten-hour time frame. "That's one of the biggest narrative challenges for us, letting people tackle the missions out of order, but also making sure that the story, from front to back, is very clearly *their* story and not just a bunch of vignettes. The way that the game is being designed and written is such that when you play through it that first time you really should be feeling like this was Milo and Lola's story and that you got caught up in what an insane road they took to get through it all."

"YOU HAVE TO ASK YOURSELF, 'WHO DO I WANT TO BE WHEN I ENTER THIS BAR?'"

The road you take to secure that final showdown with Satan isn't all that dissimilar from collecting Gym Badges in Pokémon. You need to hit various bars, raise your tolerance level for the demonic house specialities by drinking with the residents, improve your skills in mini-games such as beer pong, karaoke and dancing, before looking to challenge one of Satan's trusted envoys. "Each bar itself is heavily themed in that there will be anywhere from five to ten very specific characters inside," Krankel tells us, noting that this has been a considerable time sink for Night School in making each of the bars and the characters that reside in them feel distinct. "One of the things we're trying to do is make as many of those NPCs feel alive. Every single NPC will have [tolerance levels] functioning under the hood for them too. You may see some dude walking along that just passes out on the ground in front of you or needs to be dragged out by the bouncer. At a base level these characters will have little lives where they will leave the bar and you can follow one and go down the street, or they will have a drink and have a full conversation with somebody else. Most of that stuff is not scripted. It's just going to happen."

"Your choices can allow you to play the game however you want," says Krankel, explaining that while there are fail states in certain scenarios they only add to the drama of the adventure rather than stopping you in your tracks. "Even if you totally crap the bed in a question and answer moment, or an activity, or whatever it might be, you can still get through it."

While it might not seem like it on the surface, *Afterparty* actually feels like the natural follow up to *Oxenfree*. It's smart and intuitive, creative and unburdened by convention, just like Night School's first game. For Krankel and the rest of the development team, *Afterparty* has been a challenge, but it's one that it is happy to have undertaken. "We are in the middle of the project now; we're in a spot where we feel like the feature set and what we've decided to take on feels like it's of an appropriate size, but if we talk in six months, I might just say 'I was so wrong. This game is way too big,'" he says, laughing. "But it's just one of those games where… there's just a lot of joy and confidence in everybody here. We're like, 'This is a crazy good idea and it's going to be fun to make!'. It feels very natural, you know? The whole process of making this game has been excellent. We're more assured than I think any of us have been on any other thing we've worked on before."



GOING OVERGROUND



4A GAMES STOPS RELYING ON THE UNDERGROUND AND TAKES ITS PUBLIC TRANSPORT TO AN (ALMOST) OPEN WORLD IN **METRO EXODUS**

It's not just the death of single-player games that has been greatly exaggerated – it's the death of the mid-tier developer, too. Fortunately we have the likes of Ukrainian/Maltese dev team 4A Games flying the flag for titles that aren't costing the world to create, but are providing players with incredible worlds to explore… just ones that aren't *quite* as big, free and open as the ones Microsoft and Sony spend tens of millions of dollars on to get made. *Metro Exodus*, the third title in the post-apocalyptic depression simulator series, finally makes its move to the surface in a sustained fashion – so is it open world? Not quite.

4A and Deep Silver, the publisher behind *Exodus*, are both very aware of the limitations they're working with – but that's not a bad thing. Instead, it means we don't have to traipse through a large, empty wasteland created just to pad out space, nor do we approach situations without a clear idea of what it is we're trying to achieve. Basically, *Metro Exodus* is a linear game, with missions handed out and objectives to complete and a progression from level to level to level until you complete the game. At the same time, 4A is letting players out from the underground they spent the majority of their time in through both *Metro 2033* and *Last Light*, so it just wouldn't work to strap them in totally linear levels. Instead, *Metro Exodus* offers players the chance to explore limited – though still large – play areas for each mission, tackling challenges, exploring a little, hunting down new salvage to craft into medkits, gas mask filters, and ammunition, and giving you a few more options to approach beyond a claustrophobic corridor with something definitely horrible at the end of it.

Huw Beynon, head of global brand management for Deep Silver, has been around the Metro series a long time, and explains the general thought process behind this new direction for the series. "It's the continuation of the story," he says, "With a little bit of interweaving with Dmitry [Glukhovsky]'s Metro novels. This time, rather than just confining ourselves to the underground Moscow Metro, we wanted to take players on an epic journey across post-apocalyptic Russia."

So it is that *Exodus* earns its name, taking players – controlling returning series protagonist Artyom – on a journey from Moscow to the far eastern edge of the former Russian Federation. It's not a short journey, by any means, and it means you get to see a lot more variety than ever before – the whole game takes in all four seasons across a calendar year, and the wastes that were once Russia are as varied, and deadly, as they've been alluded to before. It's going to be a step up from tunnels and the odd deadly foray to the surface, that's for sure.

> **"4A WANTS TO INTRODUCE PLAYERS TO FAR MORE OF POST-APOCALYPTIC RUSSIA THAN THEY'VE EVER SEEN"**

"The studio literally has been working in the tunnels for seven years making, across the first two games, what almost felt like two halves of the same game," Beynon says, before admitting it's a "kind of creative fatigue" that has pushed the team at 4A to change things so radically, slapping players into a huge steam locomotive called the Aurora and sending them on this epic… well, exodus. "I think we did a great job of keeping the locations varied in the previous »


There's more than one reason to err on the side of stealth in Metro Exodus as too much noise can attract unwanted attention.





two games," Benyon says, "The underground tunnels, the frozen, snowy river of Moscow, the decimated city streets. It was really the artists who wanted to flex their creative wings a little bit, to try some new environments to play around with, and that kind of is where the initial concept for the story – how it would allow us to do that – came from."

The story in *Exodus* continues its divergence from the source material of Dmitry Glukhovsky's Metro novel series, though this time around it feels more like there's no coming back – in more ways than one – to the groundwork laid out by the author. Pushing players beyond Moscow takes *Exodus* into uncharted territories for Glukhovsky's stories much more than *Last Light* ever did, and it means 4A – with the author's blessing, of course – is free to loosen the reins a bit in terms of the lore and invent its own people, places, and things for players to encounter and likely be killed by.

"IF YOU DO HAVE THE CAPABILITY TO SURVIVE IT WILL BE BECAUSE YOU'RE USING THE INFORMATION AVAILABLE"

Our demo of *Exodus* introduced an electricity-fearing religious sect, labelling all of the sparky power as the work of Satan and blaming it for the downfall of society. As you do. While the god-fearing masses are unarmed, after luring you into their sanctuary they call in their heavy hitters, and an escape from this not-so-ludicrous, given the circumstances, cult is on the cards. It's here where *Exodus* is so obviously a linear title with crafted, small-scale events to tackle – but it's also here where improvements to elements like stealth shine through, offering players even greater ability than before to ghost their way through a section and progress the story. Escape is the objective; how you go about doing it is really up to you. Our instinct was to go for stealth, and the natural outcome was to be discovered after a mistake and pursued into the mutant-infested waters surrounding the church, before being devoured and having to start all over. Classic Metro, really.

The scope for *Exodus* has grown hugely since the first two games, and while it's true the budget behind things isn't on a par with most triple-A releases 4A has still grown as a team over the past few years. After having to struggle through the Crimean annexation and Ukrainian revolution of 2014, the studio moved its main operations to Sliema, in the north east of Malta – while still maintaining a presence in Kiev. "The studio has been growing since conception," Beynon explains. "Really the reason why the first two game were so focused was the team would spend – literally – years trying to create this incredibly ambitious game… maybe a little bit too focused and inappropriate for the team size that they had at the time!

"But this year the team has grown and evolved," he continues, "We've got around 140 to 160 people spread across the two locations now. It's made a project like this a little more possible, but at the same time it's been a longer development period than previous games." It's the traditional trade-off – *Last Light* began development almost as soon as *2033* shipped and took around three years for 4A to complete – since then it's been around four years in full production for *Exodus*: "So," Beynon laughs, "Bigger team, plus longer duration, equals more game."

Even with the new hires and new blood coursing through 4A, this is still a team with

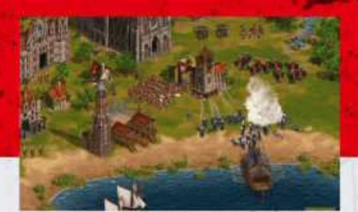
MORE THAN METRO

UKRAINIAN DEVELOPMENT CONTINUES TO GROW – HERE'S SOME OF THE BEST



MEN OF WAR
2009, PC

The sequel to the equally-good *Soldiers: Heroes of World War II, Men of War* is a confident, tough real-time tactics title that errs slightly too far towards the micromanagement end of things. Still, it's one of the best emergent storytelling games out there.



COSSACKS: EUROPEAN WARS
2001, PC

If you can stave off famine and keep your troops provided for, *Cossacks* allows players to build an army of pretty much unlimited size. That's something everyone wanted from their RTS titles at the turn of the century. Fortunately *Cossacks* is also really well made, and good fun, too.



MAGRUNNER: DARK PULSE
2013, PC/PS3/X360

It's not all wargames from Ukraine, as *Magrunner* proves. This title from Frogwares is a first-person puzzle title that combines sci-fi with Lovecraftian horror. It was creative and imaginative for its time, as well as frustrating at points, but ultimately it's an experience worth looking at.

its roots in the hardcore survival action of the original *Metro* – as well as the original *S.T.A.L.K.E.R., Shadow Of Chernobyl*. With that being the case, it's safe to say the first couple of games went somewhat ignored by the masses – definitely known to the core gamers out there, but falling by the wayside in the broader spectrum. 2014's *Metro Redux* – a remaster of the first two games re-released on PC and brought to PS4 and Xbox One in a period when neither console was inundated with big, chunky, atmospheric experiences changed the fortunes somewhat for Metro and 4A. "*Redux* was a fantastic opportunity for us to bring a whole new audience into the franchise," Beynon says. "It proved to be phenomenally successful and I think it really built a firm base [of new fans]. Yes, *Exodus* is the next big entry into a long-running series, but the studio formed in 2005 so they've really been living in this world for a long time."

Over time, though, 4A has had to adapt its approach to the Metro series – *Last Light* made things a mite less demanding. The *Redux* re-releases added the option to play in traditional or revamped difficulties – survival or Spartan – acknowledging the fact that to keep hold over a broader, more mainstream group of players, Metro had to at least make a nod towards making things less punishing. *Exodus* carries on down this path, offering players the chance to customise their experience according to just how difficult they want things to be – HUD elements can be turned on or off, ammo can be incredibly scarce or widely available, scrap can be impossible to find or plentiful and so on. *Exodus* can be set up to play as a hardcore survival game, as you might expect from 4A's pedigree, but there have been more than enough concessions made to the mainstream players. It can only be a good thing to make the experience more accessible – unless these tweaks are mandatory, which we've been assured they haven't.

"The way we have it set up at the moment, it's quite well balanced right now," Beynon explains. "We absolutely want to offer that challenging, hardcore survival experience – like our core fanbase, that's what we want. That's what they want and expect and you will definitely be able to play the game in a mode where every bullet counts, you really need to take a stealthy approach to conserve your ammunition." At the same time, it's recognised that this isn't the approach everyone wants: "There are people who want to enjoy the story much more," he continues. "Yes, the game needs a degree of challenge, but there are people who won't want to be punished by it… At the moment I don't know exactly how we're going to approach it, but we would like to cater for some different styles when people fire up the game for the first time. It might come up with that warning like, 'This is the hardcore version, you need to know what you're doing,' or, 'This is for if you enjoy the story a bit more.' I don't know exactly how those are going to pan out but I think we need to do a lot more tuning and balancing overall. When we're close to final content and we'll figure that problem out."

Another factor to consider when thinking about how *Metro Exodus* has grown beyond its smaller roots is a straightforward one: the simulation of the world players can explore. When things *were* limited to underground tunnels, it was much easier for developers to make things run well, for AI to know its way around, and for unwanted events to occur – easier, though not *easy*, that is. With *Exodus* taking place, for the most part, above ground, and in maps much larger than any of those seen in previous Metro titles, there's the question of just how well the team is managing to keep everything running along without the game tripping up over its own systems. "Metro's players have always been… I think this is typical of Eastern European and Ukrainian players, they love simulations," Beynon »


Some additional freedom of movement out in the wastes goes both ways. Enemies could come from anywhere.


Graphically, it should go without saying that Metro Exodus is hugely impressive.


Metro Exodus offers a fairly linear structure with strict missions and objectives, just in much more open levels.



DRACULA: ORIGIN

2008, PC

A point-and-click adventure game, *Dracula: Origin* plays with elements of *Bram Stoker's Dracula* legend, seeing players hunting down the titular vampire as arch nemesis Van Helsing, completing illogical-yet-satisfying puzzles along the way. An atmospheric masterclass, no doubt.



S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: CALL OF PRIPYAT

2009, PC

It's a toss-up which is best in the series, but *Call Of Pripyat* is undoubtedly the game where S.T.A.L.K.E.R. series came of age. How? Well, by being released relatively bug-free and stable. *Call Of Pripyat* took you back to the irradiated wastes of the Zone, charging you to survive the hostile environment.



SHERLOCK HOLMES: CRIMES & PUNISHMENTS

2014, PC/PS4/XO/PS3/X360

Frogwares' longest-running series of games centres on London's finest detective, and it was 2014's edition that showed the sleuth in his best light. Multiple cases, a modernised – yet still faithful to the original – Holmes, and puzzles of actual logic, it has yet to be bettered.



BOILING POINT: ROAD TO HELL

2005, PC

Well, **GamesTM** did give it 9/10 back in the day, so it has to feature in this list really. Still, there's a definite case for this notoriously buggy, broken masterpiece to go down in the halls of gaming greats. *Boiling Point: Road to Hell* was overambitious in the extreme, what a game.

THE JOURNEY TO EXODUS

4A HASN'T JUST MADE METRO GAMES. IT HAS **MOSTLY** MADE METRO GAMES

METRO 2033
2010, PC/X360

Taking place mostly underground, *Metro 2033* began the tale of the survivors of nuclear war making their way through the new 'normal' of life in Moscow's network of underground railway tunnels. It's bleak, terrifying, depressing, and something of a diamond in the rough. Those tunnels are a mite too samey after a while, mind.

METRO: LAST LIGHT

2013, PC/X360/PS3

A step forward in all the right ways for the series, *Last Light* saw the Metro series moving towards a more open, explorative style of play, while still very much maintaining a linear approach. The sequel also saw 4A games move slightly away from the hardcore survival game approach of the original, though, of course, it was still prevalent.

METRO 2033/LAST LIGHT REDUX
2014, PC/PS4/XBO

There are few HD remasters that feel absolutely necessary, and this was one of them. With the original two games not seeing the broadest audience but amassing themselves something of a cult following, it made perfect sense to up-res both games, slap them on the popular consoles (and PC again), and give players another – definitive – chance to experience the horrors of the Russian underground.

ARKTIKA.1

2017, PC (Oculus)

An Oculus-only project, showing there was space for bright and showy shooters in the world of VR. *Arktika.1* was well received in the Oculus community, but its position as a virtual reality-only title means it can only reach a limited amount of players, and the experience on show would never be as deep as that of a Metro title.

S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: SHADOW OF CHERNOBYL

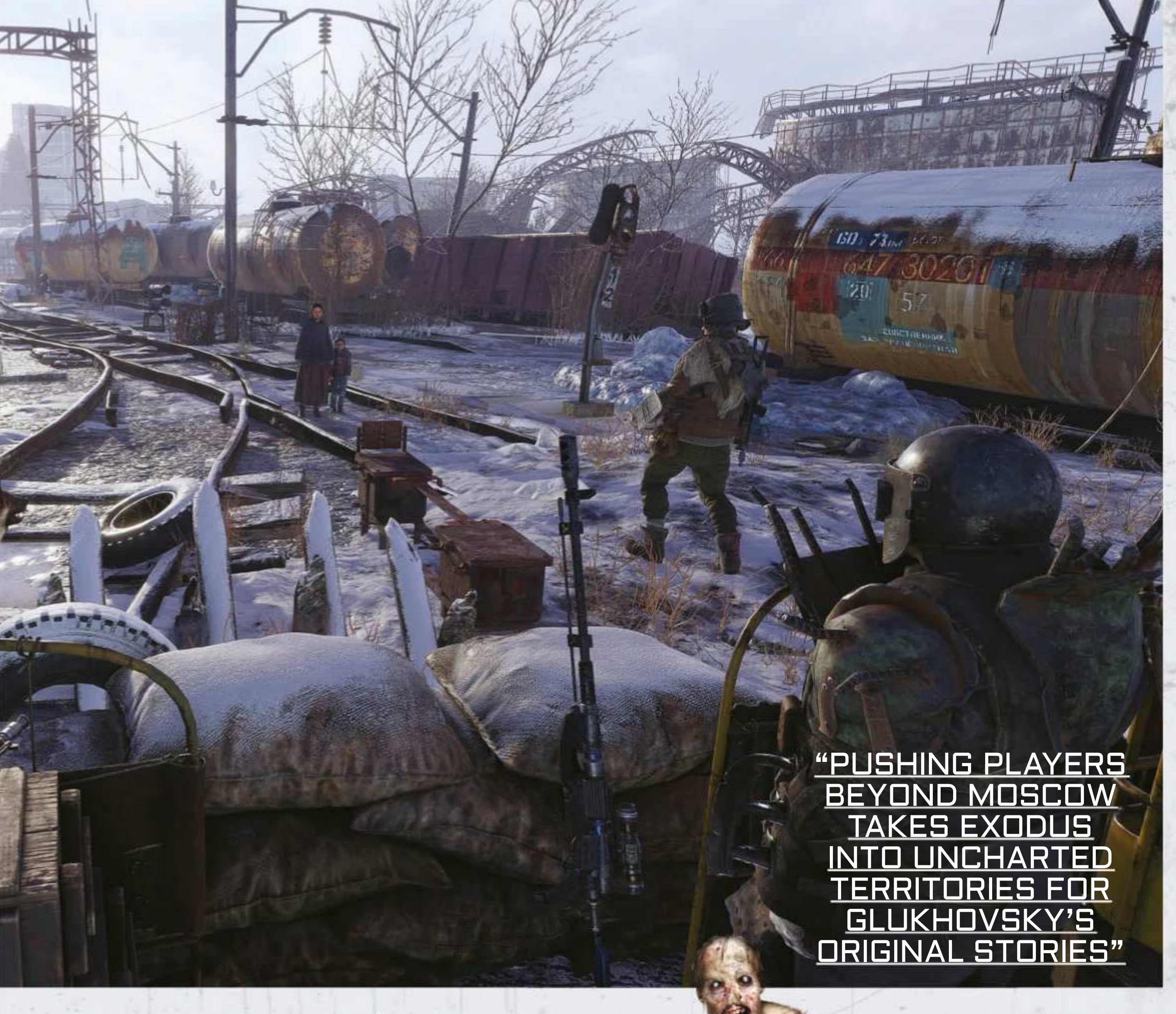
2007, PC

Finally, it's impossible to talk about the direction of 4A Games without mentioning the game that started it all – even if it did come out after 4A was formed and both Oles Shishkovstov and Alexander Maximchuk had left developer CSC Game World. The debt the Metro series owes to *S.T.A.L.K.E.R.* is huge, though – and completely undenied by the devs themselves.

explains. "They like complex models for lots of quite deep emergent systems.

"That really suited us in the first games where we tried to make those combat environments a little bit more freeform, but I think it really comes into its own now that we have these larger environments." With a huge amount of simulation going on behind the scenes – time of day, weather, biomes of human and mutants and how they interact, there's a lot more going on that can go wrong. But 4A has a handle on it – and has been making sure to encourage that controlled chaos wherever it can. After all, what's a semi-open world without a bit of a food chain going on? "You might be fighting a gang of bandits," Beynon says. "And then, as guns were fired, you attract a nearby pack of mutants if they're passing through at that time. Suddenly they come in and get involved in the mix…" It might sound like a soundbite – a bullet point for the back of the box based on little more than hypothetical marketing blurb – but the fact is we genuinely experienced this when playing the game. It's nothing new for gaming as a whole, but it helps *Metro Exodus* to feel like this really is taking place in the living, breathing world above ground. On rescuing a member of the aforementioned anti-electric church and finding out information from him on where a stash was located, a pack of marauding – well, they looked like they used to be dogs – turned up and laid waste to the few remaining bandits in the area, and the zealot we had just freed. Sorry friend, but that's just how life is in Metro: sad, tragic and short.

If you do have the capability to survive, however, it will be because you're using the information available to you. Yes, you might have turned off all the HUD prompts and whatever else gets in the way, but your tools are always there. Listen to the sounds of people and mutants around and figure out where they are so you can engage or avoid effectively. Plan your journey using a delightfully (and *Far Cry 2*-evoking) low-tech



"PUSHING PLAYERS BEYOND MOSCOW TAKES EXODUS INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORIES FOR GLUKHOVSKY'S ORIGINAL STORIES"

map, which you have to press a button to get out and can't be scrolled or otherwise navigated – your compass will see a lot of use. Hunt everywhere –though watch out for those jump scares when you do – to gather as many materials as possible for your crafting. And don't ever forget to craft, making the essentials along with tweaking your weapons and modding them to unrecognisable levels in a system that has been fundamentally tweaked since *Last Light*.

This new gun-tweaking system results in weapons that can be made into much more personal killing machines, as well as firearms for all occasions. Again it's not something we haven't seen elsewhere – larger clips, suppressors, different stocks and so on – but it is something that's a very nice fit for the world of Metro. It makes sense. All of the essential crafting does, even if it is nothing particularly new: rather something you see being a necessary part of *Metro Exodus*, and something that adds that extra layer of tension as you approach an area riddled with hostile creatures or people. Can you afford to fire any bullets? Is there a way around this without wasting anything? Might it be worth it to go in all guns blazing and hope the salvage recovered in the aftermath is enough to cover your losses? It's all a fun tactical thought process to go through, if you so choose, and has the added benefit of backing up Metro's fiction nicely.

With *Metro Exodus*, 4A Games wants to show off its development chops like never before. It wants to introduce players to far more of post-apocalyptic Russia than they've ever seen, and it wants to throw all the weird and wonderful it can through the journey. With many millions more behind it, *Metro Exodus* could have been an epic open world survival game full of all the epic, orchestral bluster we've come to expect from the big guns. So it's actually to the game's benefit, then, that it's being made with a *relatively* modest budget, with a *relatively* small dev team, meaning we have to – by design – end up with a game that is more handmade, that is less padded, and that is more mid-tier. That, dear readers, is not a bad thing – it's a pretty good thing, in fact. And *Metro Exodus* could well play a big part in the revitalisation of a tier of gaming we've been missing out on for years now. And even if it doesn't, at least you'll be able to ride your super-train across what was once Russia shooting bad guys and mutants in the face before exposing yourself to radiation and dying horribly. Classic Metro.

10 YEARS OF THE APP STORE

AS WE MARK A DECADE OF GAMING ON IOS DEVICES, WE LOOK BACK OVER THE KEY GAMES RELEASED IN EACH OF THOSE YEARS AND WHAT THEY BROUGHT TO THE PLATFORM

AIR HOCKEY

29 July 2008



One of the App Store's earliest successes and a must-play game for its time, *Air Hockey* is a rare example of an iOS game from the earliest days of the format that is still playable today. It's also a multiplayer game, as two players can sit at opposite ends of the device to control their paddle. The smooth animation and ease of control made it incredibly intuitive to pick up for anyone with an iPhone, regardless of their gaming background.



METAL GEAR SOLID TOUCH

18 March 2009



An early example not only of a triple-A franchise making a move to the iPhone, but of how most publishers were thinking about the format at the time. *Metal Gear Solid Touch* wasn't a very good translation of the core Metal Gear concepts since it turned the traditional stealth action into a pretty simple on-rails/cover-shooter experience. That wouldn't have been the worst thing if the mechanics themselves had actually been engaging, but it really fell down there, too. So, not a great success, but many would follow in Konami's footsteps and attempt to bend and mould their franchise stars to iOS in some form. As time went by they would get a lot better at it.

CANABALT

1 October 2009



The endless runner is a firmly established and very popular genre on mobile devices these days, but you can trace its popular roots back to *Canabalt*. What made this game stand out and grab attention? For us it was the art style. The simple monochromatic look of the game somehow managing to evoke *The Matrix* with limited detail, but making fantastic use of every pixel really sold us on the concept. The speed of the game and the fantastic ramping up of the action were also key factors in our enjoyment of the game. There's a fantastically timeless feel to the whole experience that makes it a joy to pick up even today.

POCKET GOD
9 January 2009

CHESS WITH FRIENDS
12 November 2008

FIELDRUNNERS
5 October 2008

ROLANDO
18 December 2008

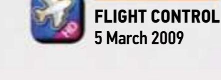


BACKBREAKER
29 September 2009

DOODLE JUMP
6 April 2009

FIFA 10
2 October 2009





FLIGHT CONTROL
5 March 2009



CALL OF DUTY ZOMBIES
16 November 2009

PASSAGE

1 November 2008



To our minds the first evidence that iOS could be a format for some amazing videogame experimentation, *Passage* had you play through the life of a single character, only you experienced this by only walking from left to right. Different paths you might take would lead you to meet a second character who would join you, but as you progressed you would notice their hair changing colour and eventually you would each die. It was a pretty moving exploration of life and death presented in simple, but effective terms. It's not available on iOS anymore, but the game (developed by Jason Rohrer) has been added to the MoMA's permanent collection and the source code was released to the public back in 2007.



UNO
14 November 2008



ZENONIA
24 May 2009



WORDS WITH FRIENDS

July 2009



Possibly the first big gaming phenomenon on iPhone, *Words With Friends* was obviously a massive Scrabble clone, right down to the multiplier tiles and value of the letters, but it was brilliantly executed. Bright and clean in its design, *Words With Friends* stripped away the stuffiness of its board game inspiration and modernised the word-building game for a new generation. It also made fantastic use of asymmetrical multiplayer, a concept that was still relatively novel, but was a perfect fit for mobile gaming in an age when online connections could sometimes be fleeting or sporadic. And it's still a great game to play.

ANGRY BIRDS

11 December 2009



Who would have thought that a title inspired by flash-physics games like *Crush The Castle* starring wingless, legless birds against a band of gormless green pigs would become one of the best selling and most downloaded releases on the App Store? We probably wouldn't have, but no one could deny the immediate playability and accessibility of Rovio's simple puzzle game. Its touch mechanics, pulling back the catapult sling to launch your bird, augmented by special abilities for the birds in your arsenal, had a near-perfect balance to them, making completion of each stage simple enough, but always teasing that you could do better with its star-rating system for performance. There have been *so* many sequels and expansions, but the core mechanics and design remain as strong now as ever.

PLANTS VS ZOMBIES

15 February 2010



Tower-defence games had already started to show signs of their vitality on smartphones and tablets at this point, but Popcap's twist on the formula, mixing it with something akin to a horde mode, helped to make the idea of fighting zombies with a bunch of flowers far more appealing than might otherwise have been the case. *PvZ* gets the most important element of such a game right with solid and easy-to-understand weapon design. Every plant has its strength and weakness, making each of them effective against a particular type of attack, but also susceptible. And as each wave of the undead comes, each with their own abilities, trying to juggle and manage your garden for the optimal resource gathering and attack strategy becomes a joyfully anarchic experience.

INFINITY BLADE

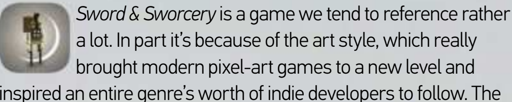
9 December 2010



This was a pretty massive moment in the history of iPhone gaming as Epic Games was at the height of its power, having released *Gears Of War 2* and worked with Chair Entertainment to produce *Shadow Complex* in the preceding couple of years. Now it was bringing the Unreal Engine to iPhone. With its high-resolution graphics and triple-A studio production values, *Infinity Blade* was visually unlike anything else on the platform, delivering impressive fidelity and spectacle. In terms of gameplay it was a fairly well-trodden action experience driven by touch-controlled QTEs. Nicely done, clearly, but not as revolutionary in terms of gameplay as it was in terms of tech. But it opened the door to even more high-quality releases in this style.

SUPERBROTHERS: SWORD & SWORCERY EP

24 March 2011



Sword & Sworcery is a game we tend to reference rather a lot. In part it's because of the art style, which really brought modern pixel-art games to a new level and inspired an entire genre's worth of indie developers to follow. The detail and texture achieved was really incredible. Then there was just the world building the game did, which was also exemplary, cultivating a mysterious fantasy world with very little in terms of action or characters to interact with. But while those were the headline-grabbing elements, what made this game so special and memorable was the soundtrack. Composed by Jim Guthrie, it manages to be ethereal and magical even though it is very technology-forward and modern. We still listen to it today and it's at the heart of the *Sword & Sworcery* experience for us.



GTA: CHINATOWN WARS
17 January 2010

FRUIT NINJA
21 April 2010

WORLD OF GOO
16 Dec 2010



TINY WINGS
18 February 2011

ANGRY BIRDS RIO
22 March 2011



SUPER STICKMAN GOLF
7 June 2011

TINY TOWER
23 June 2011



ROBOT UNICORN ATTACK
4 February 2010



MIRROR'S EDGE
1 April 2010



MONSTER DASH
18 August 2010



RECKLESS RACING
21 October 2010

RAGE
18 November 2010



LEAGUE OF EVIL
3 February 2011

BUMPY ROAD
19 May 2011

GROOVE COASTER
28 July 2011



CUT THE ROPE

1 October 2010



Physics games continued to find ground on iPhone, and anything involving simple, single-screen puzzling really stood out. Having a cute-as-all-hell mascot at the heart of the experience didn't do any harm either, and *Cut The Rope* managed to tick both of those boxes. Once again, bright and colourful was the aesthetic that won the day as you attempted to get a piece of candy to Om Nom in an ever-increasing series of bizarre boxes by slicing through ropes with your finger to gradually get the sweets to their intended location. And of course you could collect stars along the way to give your that all-important three-star rating. Another simple premise with flawless execution makes *Cut The Rope* a must-play.

KINGDOM RUSH

28 July 2011

For our money, one of the very best examples of tower-defence design on iOS, and that's a competitive field as the genre found a new lease of life on smartphones and tablets. What helped *Kingdom Rush* stand out was simple… it was simple. It struck the chord of solid tower-defence design with a clear set of strengths and weaknesses in each tower, clearly defined and well-designed enemy types so you always knew what was messing you up and fast turnaround of resources to keep the game engaging at all times. The art style was bright, but unlike many others it had a slightly comic-book, underdeveloped look to its characters that actually lent it a lot of charm.

JETPACK JOYRIDE

1 September 2011



The endless runner continued and continues to be a popular format, and *Jetpack Joyride* is one of the best examples. What Halfbrick added to the formula was even greater incentive to replay through unlockables and upgrades. Challenges that keep rotating mean you always have secondary objectives to embellish the mission of getting as far as you can and completing them unlocked new costumes, new jetpacks and abilities that could be switched in and out. Each had their role to play, often hedging your bets on how far you thought you would get and what you might face when you got there. But perhaps just as important, Halfbrick hasn't stopped updating it with seasonal features. It's a living game experience to this day.

MINECRAFT: POCKET EDITION

17 November 2011



Just as *Minecraft* was beginning to gain massive amounts of traction and send its tendrils of influence through the games industry it got this somewhat tentative, but still very impressive release on smartphones, offering some limited survival and building mechanics. But this was the Trojan horse for the next leap forward for this incredible game as its mobile sales shot through the roof and became as popular as the console version, if not more so, in most regions. And as Mojang has continued to support and update the app, you can now experience near-parity between this and the console or PC versions of *Minecraft* as well as shared worlds between platforms.

DRAW SOMETHING

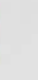
6 February 2012

Re-imagining classic board games (perhaps a generous turn of phrase) to make asymmetrical gaming experiences on iPhone had become a solid line of business at this point, and *Draw Something* was the latest stellar success. This time OMGPop looked to interpret something close to Pictionary as players were challenged to draw a word or concept and have another player guess what they had created, even being able to watch the sketch take shape as it had been drawn. For a few months it was the hottest app around, but shortly after the developer was bought by mobile giant Zynga its user base tumbled. Still, it was a really fun game to play and should probably be looked at again for a revamp someday.

WHERE'S MY WATER?
22 September 2011



TEMPLE RUN
4 August 2011



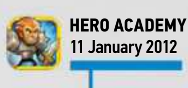
MACHINARIUM
8 September 2011



WHALE TRAIL
20 November 2011



HERO ACADEMY
11 January 2012



RUN ROO RUN
12 January 2012



MAX PAYNE
13 April 2012



CRIMSON: STEAM PIRATES
1 September 2011



ASCENSION: CHRONICLE OF THE GODSLAYER
30 June 2011



ANOMALY: WARZONE EARTH
11 August 2011



INFINITY BLADE II
1 December 2011



GRAND THEFT AUTO III

13 December 2011



At this point perhaps we shouldn't have been so surprised, but seeing Rockstar's era-defining action game land on smartphones was kind of mind-blowing back in 2011. We'd not really seen a lot of really good ports of console games to smartphones, and yet this one worked surprisingly well, with some smart adaptations of gamepad controls to a touch screen in a game that features shooting, driving and more. Seeing that this was possible really changed the way we and many developers had been thinking about the App Store as a platform. We have to wonder if something like *PUBG* or *Fortnite* would have seemed even remotely possible before *GTA III* made it look so easy.

TRIPLE TOWN
13 January 2012



PUZZLE & DRAGONS
20 February 2012

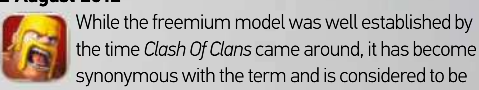


THE WALKING DEAD
26 July 2012



CLASH OF CLANS

2 August 2012



While the freemium model was well established by the time *Clash Of Clans* came around, it has become synonymous with the term and is considered to be one of the better examples for funding through smaller in-app purchases. But we would hazard to suggest that it's the game itself rather than its financial model that has ultimately made it a massive success, and a big part of that is its shared-world elements. As you build up your base and develop an army, being able to team up with up to 50 other players online to form a massive clan and take part in Clan Wars together is a huge draw. It brings a much more connected feel to what could otherwise have been a basic town-builder or RTS experience.



CANDY CRUSH SAGA

14 November 2012

One of the strange things for us about Candy Crush is that it almost feels like a throwback to an earlier age of iOS games, and an earlier age of digital games altogether, actually. This match-three puzzler managed to capture imaginations to a level that rather boggles the mind, since it doesn't appear to excel in its design or style. But perhaps it was that stripped-back feel that made it so accessible and managed to gain it 93 million users by 2014. Mechanically, we can't deny it gets the format spot on with just the right variety of candies for matching and some smart power-up mechanics unlocked when you match more than three candies in a move.

SORCERY!

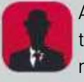
2 May 2013



The growth and potential for more narratively driven games on smartphones was beginning to come into effect as *Sorcery!* arrived, adapting the books of Steve Jackson to excellent results. Creating a form of interactive choose your own adventure/tabletop RPG, *Sorcery!* released multiple chapters in the next three years, building upon your choices and victories with each passing release. Other games have managed to deliver text-based experiences to a similar quality, but few have attempted this kind of connected experience before, and it works very well.

DEVICE 6

17 October 2013



As iOS games go we don't think that *Device 6* has gotten much attention, and yet it's another important release in the rise of narrative and more involving games on mobile devices. Simogo, who had also made *Bumpy Road*, *Beat Sneak Bandit* and *Year Walk* to great acclaim, went in a very different direction with this release. It is very text heavy, but makes fantastic use of the interactive and mobile nature of the format to bring you a very engaging and involved adventure story. As you read through the tale and solve puzzles by interacting with objects and images that appear, the mystery continues to unravel and reveal itself. It's really quite something, and thankfully it's been rather influential on games that have followed.



SUPER HEXAGON
31 August 2012

BAD PIGGIES
27 September 2012

YEAR WALK
21 February 2013



DOTS
30 April 2013

TINY THIEF
11 July 2013

LIMBO
3 July 2013



INFINITY BLADE III
18 September 2013



BASTION
29 August 2012





ANGRY BIRDS STAR WARS
8 November 2012

THE ROOM
12 September 2012

IMPOSSIBLE ROAD
9 April 2013



STAR COMMAND
2 May 2013



RYMDKAPSEL
1 August 2013



THE ROOM TWO
12 December 2013



RÉPUBLIQUE
19 December 2013



FLAPPY BIRD

24 May 2013

The story of the App Store wouldn't be complete without the tales of its most iconic and surprising breakout hits, and *Flappy Bird* is among the most bizarre and meteoric. While it was released in 2013, it would actually not take off until early 2014 and then just a month later, not even a year after it had been launched on the App Store, its creator pulled it from the App Store. So the story goes, Vietnamese developer Dong Nguyen had made *Flappy Bird* in just a few days and released it as a simple, relaxing experience, somewhat in response to more involved and complex Western games. But, finding that his game had become highly addictive he said he felt guilty about what he had made, and that was the reason behind discontinuing it. Since then many clones have emerged, it was licensed as an arcade cabinet game and it was given new life as *Flappy Birds Family* on Amazon Fire TV. A strange and fascinating journey.



HITMAN GO

17 April 2014

Watching the evolution of game styles and approaches on the App Store, *Hitman Go* feels like an interesting turning point. We had gone from triple-A IP being translated into super-simplified, vaguely related touch-controlled experiences in the early days and then seen attempts at full conversions as confidence in the hardware and control schemes improved. But here Square Enix Montreal was tasked with making something that was both true to the Hitman legacy, but would stand alone as a primarily mobile experience, and we love what it came up with. *Hitman Go*'s tabletop influences are clear, and the tactical/puzzling results it creates are fantastic. The aim is to move Agent 47 around to get a clear line on his target and then escape without being caught, but doing it all in turns against the guards works really well. And of course it's since spawned Lara Croft and Deus Ex releases in a similar style.



FALLOUT SHELTER

14 June 2015



One by one, they all eventually fell to the power and allure of smartphone and tablet gaming. One of the longest hold-outs was Bethesda, but when it finally made the move it did so with gusto. *Fallout Shelter* made exactly the right call by taking the license we all love and mixing it with a genre that makes perfect sense not only on a mobile device, but also for extended, dip-in-and-dip-out game time. With its wonderful mixture of sims and city building, not to mention the occasional Fallout-related catastrophe, it was an easy game to get into and a hard one to put down. That it beautifully filled the gap between *Fallout 4*'s announcement and launch was a nice bonus.



ALPHABEAR
15 June 2015



THIS WAR OF MINE
15 July 2015



PRUNE
17 July 2015



FTL: FASTER THAN LIGHT
3 April 2014



THOMAS WAS ALONE
15 May 2014

ALTO'S ADVENTURE
19 February 2015

TALES FROM THE BORDERLANDS
11 December 2014

VVVVVV
12 June 2014



THREES!
6 February 2014



TWO DOTS
29 May 2014

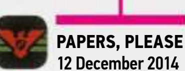
HEARTHSTONE: HEROES OF WARCRAFT
16 April 2014



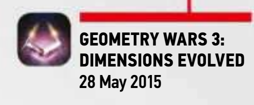
INGRESS
14 July 2014



VAINGLORY
16 November 2014



PAPERS, PLEASE
12 December 2014



GEOMETRY WARS 3: DIMENSIONS EVOLVED
28 May 2015





DON'T STARVE: POCKET EDITION
9 July 2015



PAC-MAN 256
20 August 2015

MONUMENT VALLEY

3 April 2014

We've been appreciators of Ustwo's work for some time, even before it got involved in the gaming world and it focused its creative and design talents on more utilitarian apps, but *Monument Valley* was still a pleasant surprise. In terms of art style it was clearly brilliant, mixing M.C. Escher with both Eastern and Western architectural touches. Games such as *Fez* and *Sword & Sworcery EP* were also referenced as *Monument Valley* attempted to create single-screen puzzles that invited exploration and experimentation, but still maintained a simple design language that would be intuitive enough to forego the need for any instructions. It was obviously a massive success, spawning a recent sequel and seeing its game designer and artist Ken Wong form his own studio.

FRAMED

12 November 2014

Playing *Framed*, it comes as no surprise that Hideo Kojima proclaimed it his game of the year in 2014. As a lover of gaming narrative this silent heist thriller is a wonderful exercise in dissecting story structure. But more important than all of that, it's just a really fun action game. Dragging the tiles of the action around to reorder them so that your thief escapes in every scenario becomes a fun challenge. Whether you're twisting the panels or placing them correctly, it reveals all sorts of interesting turns and responses whether you get it right immediately or not. All of it is handled with some gorgeous animation and wonderful music. It really is a beautifully executed game.

HER STORY

24 June 2015



Sam Barlow's game of interview reconstruction made for an excellent mobile experience as you gradually worked through the conversations of police with Hannah Smith around the disappearance of her husband. What really happened? What did she know? It's a fascinating journey and one that is made wonderfully interactive with its recreation of a classic PC desktop and video scrubbing. *Her Story* is one of those rare true originals, making use of its platform in an innovative way and delivering an interactive experience unlike anything else around. We have to wonder, even though it was also released on PC, whether such a concept would have been possible in a pre-App Store world.

FOOTBALL MANAGER TOUCH 2016

25 November 2015



Why highlight this game out of all of the Football Manager releases that made the move to mobile devices? Well, because it was the first to share saves across the PC and mobile version, finally bridging the gap between Football Manager's most popular incarnation and its most accessible. Bringing down that divide between home system and mobile versions has been a massive shift for the industry, helping to legitimise the platforms as gaming machines whether you use them as your primary or secondary format. Seeing Football Manager make that connection felt like an important moment in the history of the App Store, bringing down a barrier that always seemed scalable.

POKÉMON GO

6 July 2016



Mark this one up as not only another massive mobile phenomenon, but also a massive milestone in the progress of games on the Apps Store. Where iPhone gaming may have started out having to rely on asymmetrical multiplayer to combat the likelihood of spotty and sporadic online connections to keep games going, *Pokémon Go* is an always-online, GPS-tracking experience that taps into the strengths of smartphones as devices while also melding the Pokémon experience to work in short, sharp bursts. That the game managed to sweep the globe, connecting players with the common goal of catching 'em all, spoke not only to the universal appeal of the little critters, but to the strength of these devices as connective tools.

SUPER MARIO RUN

15 December 2016



And then Nintendo arrived. What a watershed moment this was to see Mario running around on an iPhone after all these years. To see the moustachioed wonder on anything other than a Nintendo platform just seemed odd, but he was a great fit for the continuous runner genre (a clever spin on the endless runner that gave the style some structure). *Super Mario Run* has ultimately been a bit of a mixed bag for Nintendo as we understand it, picking up lots of free downloads for the demo stages, but not a massive pick-up of the paid-game unlock that sits within. Perhaps it would have been better off just charging for the game out of the gate? It goes to show that even legends of the industry don't find launching into the competitive App Store environment easy, but it's set Nintendo on an exciting new course.



HYPERBURNER
22 June 2016

INKS
4 May 2016





DEUS EX GO
18 August 2016



DOWNWELL
14 October 2015

CLASH ROYALE
2 March 2016

PINOUT
27 October 2016





FIRE EMBLEM HEROES
2 February 2017



EUCLIDEAN LANDS
12 March 2017

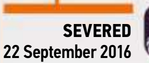
LARA CROFT GO
27 August 2015



HUMAN RESOURCE MACHINE
1 June 2016



HIDDEN MY GAME BY MOM
8 August 2016





SEVERED
22 September 2016



MINI METRO
18 October 2016



A NORMAL LOST PHONE
25 Jan 2017



CAUSALITY
13 February 2017



REIGNS

11 August 2016



There are some ideas so ingenious in the way they connect the dots between concepts that when they land they almost seem obvious in hindsight. If someone had told us that a really good mobile game concept would be a monarchy simulator played entirely by swiping left and right to make decisions we probably would have laughed in their faces. *Reigns* did it though, harnessing the simple controls made most popular by dating apps and applying a seemingly complex social approval system behind it to decide the fate of your reincarnating monarch. Melded with great humour and wonderful twists in its emerging story, *Reigns* is an absolute delight that genuinely feels as if it could never have existed in any previous era of gaming.

HIDDEN FOLKS

15 February 2017



Hidden-object games became a massive business on the App Store, mirrored by their success on Facebook, which is actually a complementary relationship between platforms that dates back to the earliest flash games on the social network. But *Hidden Folks* takes things a step beyond the interactive oil paintings and 3D renders that such games typically portrayed. This game took its inspiration more from Where's Wally (or Waldo for our American readers), giving you a series of tiny characters and objects to find in a wonderful sketched, black and white image. The scenarios are packed with details and great humour and as simple search and tap games go, it's simply the best we've played. *Hidden Folks* is one of those really easy-to-engage-with delights that the App Store throws us from time to time.

CARD THIEF

19 March 2017



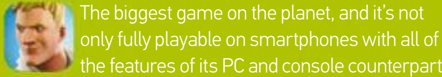
Arnold Rauers has a series of card-based games, each of which is a spin on the well-trodden, perhaps most prevalent example of a casual videogame experience, *Solitaire*. While *Card Crawl* is a roguelike played with cards and *Miracle Merchant* a potion-brewing shopkeeper sim, *Card Thief* is a stealth game. Your mission is to sneak around a dungeon with your thief card, picking up the other cards and hopefully the treasure before making your escape. The trouble is that some cards will be obstacles or guards who will arrest you if they spot you. Describing it makes it sound so much more complex than it really is. Bottom line, there are nine cards on the board, and like *Solitaire* you're looking for the right match to keep the game going until you collect everything you need. It's fantastic.

GOROGOA

14 December 2017



This little puzzler was the highlight of our Christmas (just don't tell our families that). Jason Roberts put together a really engrossing, multilayered puzzle experience where all you need to do is move tiles around a four-block surface to keep the story moving. But while that sounds easy enough, it involves zooming in and out of the images on each tile to complete the overall picture or reveal new secrets hidden in the art. The fact that the art style remains clean and consistent throughout means that finding the important detail isn't as easy as it could be. You have to read the context clues or spot the similar shapes that might combine in an interesting way. Like any great puzzle game, it gives you that thrill of discovery over and over again.



FORTNITE

15 March 2018

The biggest game on the planet, and it's not only fully playable on smartphones with all of the features of its PC and console counterparts, but it also connects to the PC game, meaning you're playing against all of the same people. What an incredible technical feat and an immense milestone in the history of smartphone games less than ten years after the App Store launched. From games that could hardly handle online functionality and were best suited to simple graphics and gameplay demands, we now have a fully featured third-person online shooter playing against PC veterans. What an amazing age we live in. Of course, this is a wonderful showcase for the versatility of Epic's Unreal Engine too, but then that's the kind of competition that the App Store has encouraged in the industry.



MIRACLE MERCHANT
2 August 2017



MONUMENT VALLEY 2
5 June 2017

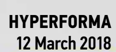




THE WITNESS
20 September 2017



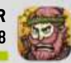
ALTO'S ODYSSEY
21 February 2018





HYPERFORMA
12 March 2018

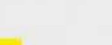




MERGE STAR
26 March 2018



OLD MAN'S JOURNEY
18 May 2017



SWIM OUT
9 August 2017



REIGNS: HER MAJESTY
6 December 2017





FRAMED 2
14 June 2017



PLAYERUNKNOWN'S BATTLEGROUNDS
19 March 2018



UMIRO
8 March 2018

ANIMAL CROSSING: POCKET CAMP

21 November 2017



Nintendo kept its mobile game run going after achieving a little more success with *Fire Emblem Heroes* than *Super Mario Run*, and now turning to *Animal Crossing*. We have to say, we thought this would be a marriage made in heaven, but somehow it just didn't quite happen. We bring it up here as a highlight because unlike miss-fires of the past, we don't think this was a case of a developer dumbing down a concept too much or misunderstanding the platform, it just made the experience too light. But importantly, the Japanese team hasn't given up and *AC:PC* has continued to evolve and improve in the last few months. If you dipped in last year and it didn't click for you, it may be worth giving the game another look.

FLORENCE

14 February 2018



Four years after *Monument Valley*, Ken Wong was back with his new studio, Mountains, and a new format of game experience. *Florence* is essentially a sim of a relationship, from the awkward first bloomings of love to the awkward witherings of it, all played out over 20 chapters, each with unique puzzle mechanics that either reveal or mimic the events on screen. The game plays out (mostly) wordlessly, but so much is invoked and revealed through its still cartoon images and light animations. The world of Florence's life comes alive as you explore it more and more and she grows into herself at the same time. It ends up being a really genuine and uplifting experience to play that hits an emotional note rarely seen in games.



"I JUST FEEL LIKE ANYTHING IS BETTER THAN BEING NORMAL"

WE CATCH UP WITH GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE'S CEO GOICHI 'SUDA51' SUDA AS HE CELEBRATES 20 YEARS OF THE STUDIO AND PREPARES TO LAUNCH...

TRAVIS STRIKES AGAIN: NO MORE HEROES



INDEPENDENT SPIRIT

Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes probably isn't going to be the game that you think it is. The same can largely be said of just about anything that has carried a Goichi Suda credit over the last 25 years, but it's especially true here as Grasshopper Manufacture embraces the spirit of independent development.

"The important thing for us, when considering the scope of *Travis Strikes Again*, was the team size. We started with only four people and now we are up to 15. It is indie-sized in both the team and the budget as well," Suda tells us. "These limits have sort of determined the style of the game that we are creating. We decided to break away from tradition and go after something new."

Even though the game is carrying the 'No More Heroes' branding, Suda is treating it as a new IP of sorts. It's resolutely a spin-off, drawing on the past of returning hero Travis Touchdown – not to mention the weird and wonderful world that he inhabits – but it has a different energy about it than the other games in the series. This, Suda believes, is because of the freedom working as an independent entity has granted Grasshopper. "It is absolutely true that we have more freedom to experiment. But we do still have a very high standard of quality that we have to meet with every single thing that we do. That's what makes the development of *Travis Strikes Again* very hard, but also a lot of fun."

Of course, the idea of Suda51 unchained has many in the industry as overjoyed as it does nervous. This is, after all, the first time the famed director – responsible for such beloved cult classics as *Super Fire Pro Wrestling Special*, *The Silver Case* and *Killer7* – has stepped into the creative director role in six years, since 2012's *Lollipop Chainsaw*. Is there anybody at the studio providing any creative oversight? Obviously not! That's *so* not punk rock.

"Some of the ideas might be a little 'out there', but we never really think about it while we are developing the game. I just feel like anything is better than being normal," laughs Suda. "We are very free right now. And the only person that pretty much exists that could say no to an idea right now is me."

We can tell you this from experience, folks, it'll be a sad day for this industry when Suda begins saying no to Suda. Thankfully, it doesn't sound like that will be on the cards anytime soon. When asked whether he's concerned by the apparent homogenisation of triple-A game development – not to mention the question mark surrounding the future of single-player games – Suda is quick to assure us that this is why Grasshopper has steered towards the indie model, so it can be free of such concerns. The studio wants to be free to make choices. It wants to be free to make mistakes. It wants to be free to be as weird as it wants to be.

"Publishers are probably looking at the numbers, the totals. But gamers will always, ultimately, want to play a variety of different games. When you play a multiplayer game, sometimes it will make you want to play a single-player game and vice-versa; people go back and forth. As far as I go, personally, marketing and totals like that are the number one thing that I don't think about while making games."

VIRTUAL INSANITY

Travis Touchdown is back in action, not in a way he ever expected, but that's the way life cuts you sometimes. After his bloody ascension through the ranks of the United Assassins Association to his dismissal of that world entirely, the character has always found himself in some pretty weird situations. »



No more so than this, of course; *Travis Strikes Again* picks up seven years after the conclusion of *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle*, where we catch the number one assassin living the easy life – he's traded in his beam-saber for a gamepad and is chilling it in a trailer park. Of course, it isn't long before Badman tracks him down, vows revenge for the death of his daughter, and sets off a chain of events that sees the duo sucked inside the prototype console, the Death Drive Mark II. Yup, you read that correctly. "The idea of a game within a game is something that I've always wanted to do. In fact, I wanted to do it previously with another company…" Suda says before trailing off, a secret to be revealed another time perhaps. "But this time, with this entry into the No More Heroes series, I wanted to take Travis away from fighting assassins and into something else."

Travis Strikes Again sees the anti-hero venturing into virtual game worlds, six to be precise. While the full extent of the titles you'll be stomping through is yet to be revealed, it's easy enough to get a sense of what to expect. "The way that we decided what the genres of the game worlds would be is this: these six game worlds that Travis journeys through would be the titles that launch alongside the Death Drive Mark II," says Suda with a smile. Those launch titles are a collection of the usual suspects, among them will be a puzzle and a racing game, a shoot-'em-up and a hack-and-slash action game, many of these will even be based off of ideas the director has sat with for a while. "It's that, mixed in with past projects that I was never able to achieve."

This is how Grasshopper is able to leave behind the conventional action of No More Heroes and try out some new concepts, mechanics and styles. It ensures that the game will be varied and unpredictable, not all that surprising given the personnel working on it. And if you're feeling like the idea of the 'Death Drive' sounds familiar to you, it's either because you're a *Let It Die* player or a fan of the work of legendary film director David Cronenberg.

"My ultimate goal whenever I make any sort of game is to make people feel like they are actually entering the world they are playing. With *Let It Die*, that game also deals with the idea of entering a game… It's kind of like, well, what if Travis ran into the player who is already in the game world of *Let It Die*? What would happen there? It's that idea that really inspired me.

"Also, for the past [five or six years] I've been doing lectures at a university and during that lecture I always bring up this movie called *Existenz*, by David Cronenberg. That film also deals with people going inside of videogame worlds, so I think that this is the culmination of all of that stuff coming together to help form *Travis Strikes Again*."

LASTING LEGACY

This is a time of celebration. Goichi Suda is not only marking his 25th anniversary working in the games industry but in addition, Grasshopper Manufacture – the studio he founded and continues to serve as CEO – will this year celebrate 20 years of active service.

It's been a wild ride. Grasshopper has made a name for itself by developing titles fraught with financial risk but utterly unburdened by the pressures of the wider industry. Its games are original and imaginative, blurring the lines between serious themes and comedic tones, larger-than-life characters and deeply graphic content. That's the Grasshopper way; that's the Suda way, and there's no changing that now.

While the studio is still supporting its free-to-play experiment, *Let It Die*, it is now wholeheartedly focused on nurturing its smaller incubation projects and on remasters of





old classics, like *Killer7* on PC. Suda is happy with the way it has worked out, as it means he has more time to enjoy the parts of the job that often go overlooked: the people. "It feels great to be back in the creative director position. Mainly because it has meant that I can be closer with the staff members here – it's always great to see them at work," he tells us. "You encounter their problems and the good things that happen first hand, and you can feel the development on a bigger scale.

"With big teams, you only see certain staff members during meetings and then there will be some staff members that you never see at all! But now everyone can just come to my chair and ask me questions, even some of the younger staff members on the team. I feel like, as Grasshopper Studios veterans, it is our job to help nurture the talent in the young staff members. That has always been my ideal workplace."

While Suda isn't ruling out the possibility of one day steering Grasshopper's new-found preference for smaller staffed and budgeted development in a different direction, nor is he ruling out the possibility of working once again with external clients on original IPs, but whatever happens in the future it will all stem from the work that is being completed on *Travis Strikes Again*. "We are open to collaborations again in the future but with this small team that we have now we want to keep this as the core team. Even if we were to make a bigger-sized game with a bigger team, the *Travis Strikes Again* team will remain the core of it," Suda tells us, adding, "That's why we are really focused [and] happy taking our time to make something that the fans will enjoy."

Travis Strikes Again isn't the only area of focus. As Suda teases, "It's the 20th anniversary of Grasshopper Manufacture this year, which makes it the perfect opportunity to look back on our history." The first step on that journey is a full remaster of the legendary *Killer7*, a title Suda holds very close to his heart – it was, after all, the game that introduced the West to »



Travis Strikes Again will be comprised of six virtual worlds, each of which containing a different style of game for the titular hero to crash through. The games are envisioned to be the launch titles for the Death Drive Mark II.

HEAVY BEATS

Given that this is a Grasshopper game, you just know that *Travis Strikes Again* is going to feature pretty awesome music to compliment the wild action. This time around, the studio is putting the talents of a DJ duo to work. It's something Suda is hugely excited about, particularly as *Travis Strikes Again* is going to feature such a wide variety of worlds and gameplay styles. "Sometimes we let the composers do just about whatever they want, sometimes we sit down with them and have detailed meetings. For this game we are working with DJ Abo and DJ 1-2," Suda tells us. "They both love games and they are young creators. I think that this is a really fresh combination and I hope that it creates a lot of energy that will be expressed through the music of the game."



his eccentric creative vision. Despite being announced after we had spoken with the man himself, we can share with you his reasoning for why he would rather work on a remaster of the title than a full sequel.

"If I had to choose, I would probably go with the remaster of *Killer7*. That's because the original GameCube version is very hard to find these days. If I could make a perfect remaster of that, and make it available for anyone who wants to play it, well… that would be pretty great." Suda, it's happening! Now you just need to turn your attention to that remake of 2001's *Flower, Sun, And Rain* that you also wanted.

ACTION PACKED

"One thing that we felt like we definitely needed in *Travis Strikes Again*, no matter what, was the action. The variation of it, the motion, and the skills; we spent a large part of the budget and the schedule focused on bringing that through," considers Suda, before adding excitedly, "Oh! And, of course, the boss fights! When you think of No More Heroes you think of boss fights – we've put a lot of energy into making sure that the boss fights are really fun."

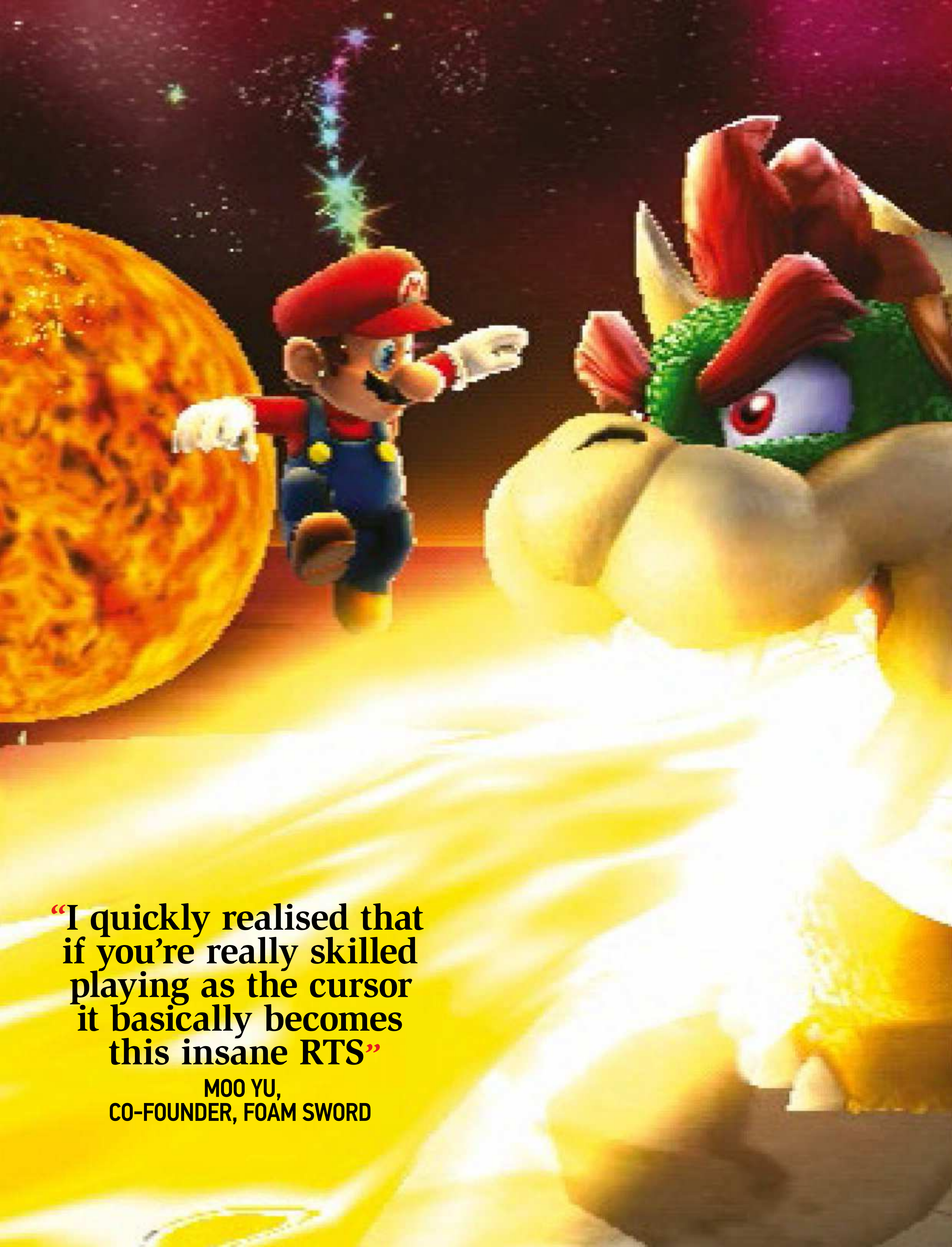
We've only had the opportunity to sample one of the six virtual worlds, that of 'Electric Thunder Tiger II'. It's a top-down hack-and-slash game drenched in neon. Accompanied by Bad Man, who acts as a co-op partner, you're left to romp around the stage in a simple, albeit effective fashion. It's been refined to work smoothly with a single Joy-Con controller and attacks are easy enough to execute, allowing you to confidently push through stages and waves of enemies. It's funny too, not that we'd expect anything less; peppered in-between the usual No More Heroes silliness – yes, you still perch on a toilet to save your progress – is some sharp, self-referential and witty humour. Everything you would hope and expect to see from Grasshopper, basically.

Suda is happy with the reaction. It's giving the studio the energy to see this project through to its completion ahead of its planned 2018 release window. "Electric Thunder Tiger II, the game that is being demoed, has been in there since the start. It's been the crux of what we've been working on and there are a lot of feelings attached to it.

"We were very nervous about showing this off," he continues, "but we were happy to see people quickly catch on to it. They were using the skills, they were saying that the controls felt good," a note Suda is particularly happy about, as he stresses that building so many different mechanics and systems for each of the game worlds has been a challenge, but one his team is having fun with. "It's been a huge relief. Our goal has been achieved; it meant we weren't wrong to try this and that we are on the right track."

There is still a lot of work to be done, but Suda is happy with where *Travis Strikes Again* is right now. He is, in fact, getting to the stage now where he is beginning to think about the end of the game and what might come next. Still, he assures us, he is always looking to learn and grow, anticipating reactions from the fans to get a better sense of where next he should turn his attention. "I've actually been thinking about this a lot, about what I hope players will take away from *Travis Strikes Again*, as I begin to think about the ending. It's something that I've been considering every day. You know," he says, pausing contemplatively for the first time in 45 minutes. "I haven't decided what the ending of the game is going to be yet… but I'm hoping that it will make people want to meet Travis again someday."

Travis Strikes Again: No More Heroes is a Nintendo Switch exclusive with a planned release window of 2018. Grasshopper Manufacture has pitched this as a spin-off, but it hasn't ruled out the potential of No More Heroes 3 in the future.



"I quickly realised that if you're really skilled playing as the cursor it basically becomes this insane RTS"

MOO YU, CO-FOUNDER, FOAM SWORD



WHY I ❤...

SUPER MARIO GALAXY

MOO YU,
CO-FOUNDER, FOAM SWORD

“*I played* **Super Mario Galaxy** *with my wife; the thing that I found just fascinating about it as a co-op game is that you have Mario and then you have the cursor, and when we first started playing I would play Mario and she would play the cursor. She would just get bored and say: ‘There’s not enough to do here.’ But, on the other hand, she doesn’t play enough 3D platformers to be able to play as Mario… we tried it anyway.*

She switched over to Mario and what I quickly realised is that if you’re really skilled playing as the cursor it basically becomes this insane RTS where you’re trying to help this fumbling player that can’t really control Mario, and you’re trying to stop every object from hurting them, move every platform underneath them and we had just the greatest time in the world.

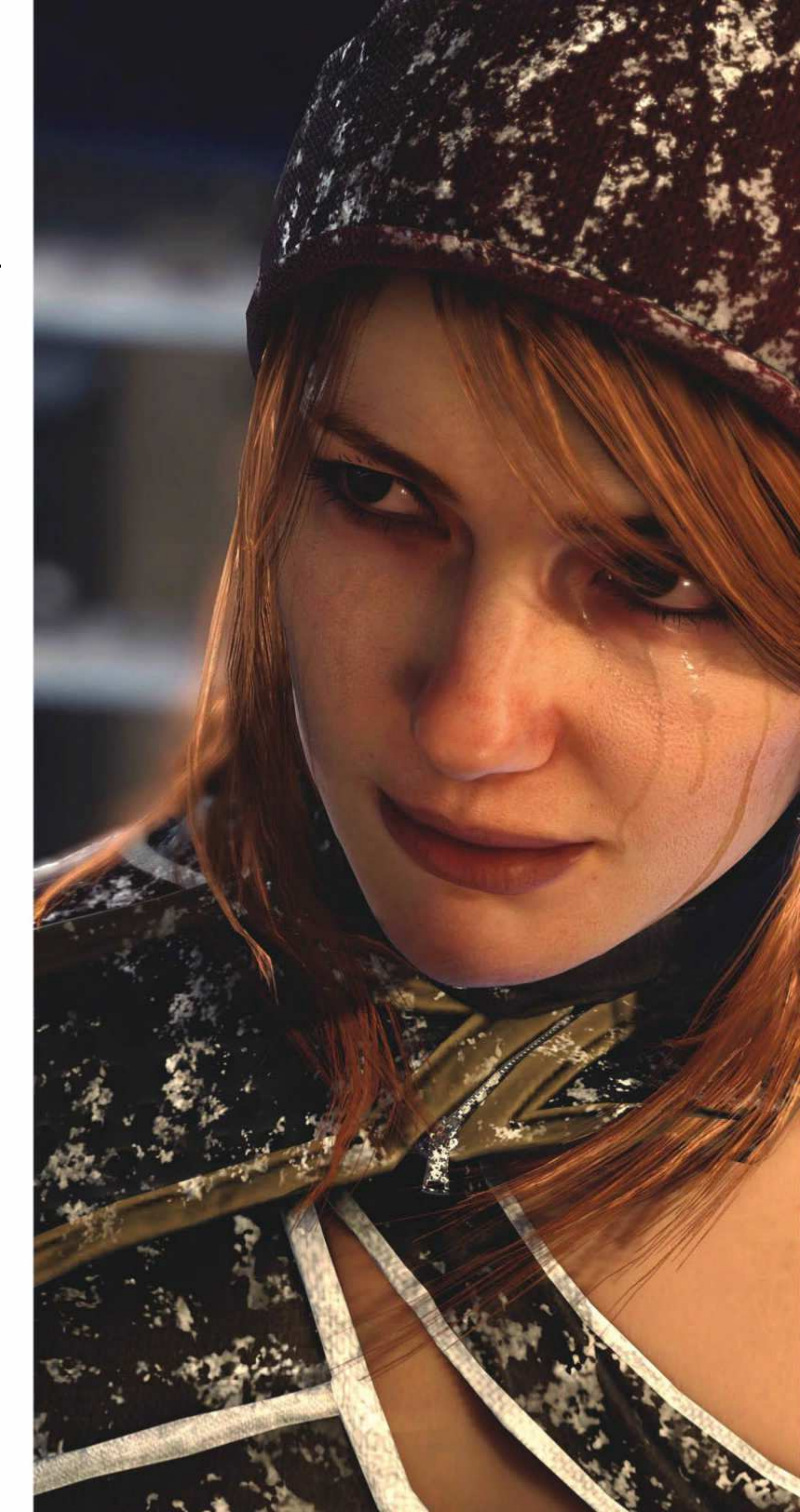
The saddest moment was that one day she was off sick from work and she was like: ‘I’m just going to play a couple of levels.’ I was at work, and that’s when the facade had been removed and she tried to play on hero own. **Super Mario Galaxy** *can be a very difficult game if all the enemies aren’t stunned and the platforms have stopped moving and that kind of stuff. I really just love that asymmetric co-op experience. They always pitched it as you have your little brother and he can collect stars as the second player, but for us when we reversed the roles it really became a thing of its own. It’s one of the greatest gaming experiences I’ve had with my wife.*”

Reviews

74

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

A stirring tale or misjudged allegory bedevilled by QTEs? It's time to find out





THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven and, of course, ten. Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us. **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10. Simple. The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection. Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable. Again, simple. Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest. We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off. Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact. They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.













AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right. But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing. Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:

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 @gamesTMmag #gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright

DETROIT IS POSSIBLY QUANTIC DREAM'S MOST IMMERSIVE EXPERIENCE

MESSING WITH MENUS

While we would certainly recommend playing *Detroit* in long, clean chunks, we also have to tell you to drop out back into the main menu from time to time. You see, the android there, who at first appears to be a host to the experience, turns out to have a lot more to say and many more interactions to offer the deeper you get into the story. It's a small touch, but one we liked quite a lot. There are also a series of questions that you will be asked, and you will be shown percentages of what other *Detroit* players answered. These questions will have to do with themes touched upon in the game, such as the role of technology in our lives and our potential feelings towards AI. It helps bring some additional personal investment to the story being depicted, and is a neat little addition by Quantic Dream.





DO ANDROIDS DREAM OF QUANTIC SHEEP?

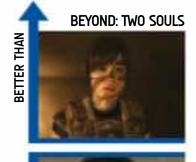
Detroit: Become Human

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: France
PUBLISHER: Sony Computer Entertainment
DEVELOPER: Quantic Dream
PRICE: £52.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

BEYOND: TWO SOULS





HEAVY RAIN

WORSE THAN



Left: Each android has their own distinct feel and personality in the game, dictating to some degree the scope of choices you're going to have to pick from. They're not completely blank slates for you to imprint on.

Left: We recommend a clean first playthrough of *Detroit* before revisiting chapters and seeing how they could have turned out. The illusion is better preserved by not asking how it's done.

You can feel *Detroit* striving to be more than it ultimately turns out to be. We don't mean for that to sound overly critical, but only to suggest that while fantastic progress has been made from *Heavy Rain* through *Beyond* and now *Detroit: Become Human*, it also doesn't seem as if David Cage's vision has been fully realised just yet, although it might be the closest he's ever gotten.

What we will say to its absolute credit is that the subject matter of *Detroit: Become Human* suits Quantic Dream's style down to a tee. Working in sci-fi really suits the studio's approach to menus, character design, its cinematic flair with a camera, and even the nature of the controls. While the aim of these games has always been to bridge the gap between movie and game experience in as tight and clean a way as possible, the quicktime events, HUD elements and investigative twists sometimes felt like they put a barrier between us as players and the action. With androids as your leads that doesn't feel as odd.

Detroit works with this really well as it establishes early on that it's the programming the androids themselves that's dictating where they can and can't go in the game world (a simple twist on the invisible wall concept), that the different elements they see around them are part of how they view the world. And it's interesting to see that change through the game too as they first break their strict programming (or not, as the case may be) and establish their own priorities. Then, suddenly, you choose not to walk down the alley, not because your programming says not to, but because the character has chosen a priority for themselves that they are tied to.

It creates a nice feedback loop for the game as mechanics and interface intermingle with the narrative and character development. In that way, *Detroit* is possibly Quantic Dream's most immersive experience, rarely feeling like it's breaking the illusion of the reality it's building, even when button prompts are appearing on the screen every few seconds.

It's not without its inconsistencies though. It still includes a plethora of seemingly inane control prompts to interact with the world around you or give you a small role to play in what is broadly a cutscene. It can sometimes feel like interactivity for its own sake, checking in with us just to make sure we don't feel left out of the action. But the game doesn't need to keep doing that so long as it's doing the rest of its job right, and it often does. As you get deeper into the story, you will be invested and you will feel involved in every moment, even if you're not being asked to press X or slide your finger across the Touch pad, so feeling the need to do so can detract from that a little.

There's also the question of when you do and don't get to make a choice for the character. This is a tricky area for any game that allows you to dictate so much of the personality and decision-making of a protagonist; how much will the game assume control to keep the character on a particular track and how much will it allow us to control those choices. We have to say that our experience of Kara, Connor and Markus was pretty consistently in our hands, with only a few minor conversations where we thought it was curious we didn't get a say in the words being spoken, but they stood out because of how rare they were.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

THE MULTI-NARRATIVE: We're pleased to see Quantic Dream return to this format of storytelling with three protagonists to follow and cross paths. It makes for a really compelling and challenging experience.

Which brings us to our android protagonists in a little more focus. We have to say that we rather liked all three of them, and for pretty different reasons in each case. They each offer slightly different degrees of control too, which is interesting. Kara's story is probably the simplest and most focused, which does mean that it lacks some of the broader, bigger-picture narratives that Connor and Markus enjoy, but it's the emotional core that can inform a lot of your thinking process with regards to the other characters. It doesn't really feel like you have a lot of control over her relationships, but you can control her actions, and the escape plot just keeps ratcheting up for her.

Connor feels very much like FBI agent Norman Jayden from *Heavy Rain*, this time with his high-tech glasses replaced by an enhanced version of the memory palace that all androids can tap into, freezing time momentarily to highlight points of interest and review directives. As the newest android off the production line, his journey is a gradual questioning of mission

versus self. His objective is to solve the deviant crisis, but that means hunting and ultimately shutting down the androids who are 'malfunctioning'. How far is he willing to go to do that, and to what degree is he willing to ingratiate himself with the humans around him to 'fit in'? It's a slow burner, but a really satisfying element of the game with its detective elements.

And that leaves Markus, whose story is really the overarching one of *Detroit*, and the one that is driving the events in the world that are so badly affecting the other characters. His is a purely moral struggle of peace versus violence. *Detroit* does a fantastic job of delivering both of those potential through lines for you, giving you ample reasons and opportunities to flip between one or the other if you feel compelled to do so. Markus is the character who feels as if he offers the greatest overall control of his narrative and decision making, although some of his relationships feel a little too easily won.

But as with previous Quantic Dream games, it's not just about the decisions you make, but the speed in which you make them and whether you fail or succeed along the way. One thing that impressed us greatly was how even things that felt like failure actually wound up being interesting threads to pull later on. On a couple of occasions, what seemed like negative outcomes in our narrative created boon opportunities for us later. And similarly, doing what sometimes seemed like the right thing or the moral thing could send us down a dark path.

And there are so many paths. Quantic Dream made the decision with this game to reveal the threads (albeit in textless flowchart form to give you nothing more than an impression) that could have been taken. We had our concerns that this would remove some of the tension from the experience or show us too much behind the curtain, but thankfully that's not the case. What it does do is give you about a thousand reasons why you'll need to go back and play through again to see how things could have turned out. You can start over at the end, of course, but you can also dip back into completed chapters and select a Do Not Save option so that you can test out ideas without fear of overwriting your original experience. We would highly recommend a clean opening playthrough though, because it makes for a far more suspenseful and compelling experience.

In fact, *Detroit* manages to maintain its suspenseful story very nicely. The opening negotiation scene, released as a demo before *Detroit: Become Human*'s launch, sets the tone for what's to come, giving every chapter an urgency and threat because you've already seen how nasty things can get very quickly with Connor's rooftop showdown. When the high-stakes decisions start coming in thick and fast, especially once storylines begin to overlap, the potential for catastrophe at any dropped quicktime move or any misspoken word feels immediate.

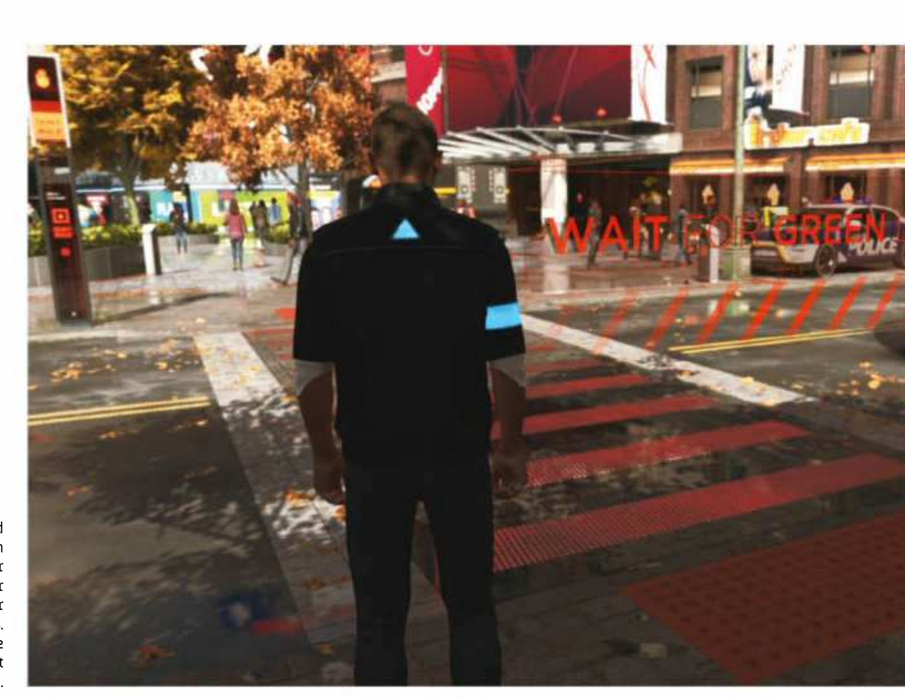
But there's a certain rhythm and formula to a Quantic Dream game that becomes transparent as you play. You can be fairly confident that any fight is largely survivable up to the fifth or sixth quicktime event onwards. You can be fairly certain that while death is possible at any time, you will be given ample opportunities to avert it. If you've played the studio's recent offerings then this will come as no surprise to you. That all said. *Detroit* does a better job in most instances of disguising

FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
First play through is about ten hours – much the same as recent Quantic Dream games.

Q. BUT PLENTY OF REPLAY VALUE?
Definitely. *Detroit* is a far more sprawling and varied kind of experience than most narrative games. It's possibly even more branching than *Heavy Rain* or *Beyond*.

Q. DOES DETROIT GO 'FULL CAGE'?
If by 'Full Cage' you mean getting lost in spirituality and existential issues that have no bearing on the story, then no. *Detroit* has its heady moments, but its themes are actually well grounded.



Right: With its android protagonists Quantic Dream has a great excuse for putting up barriers for the player in the world or dictating certain decisions. Programming rules these character's lives just as it rules game design.

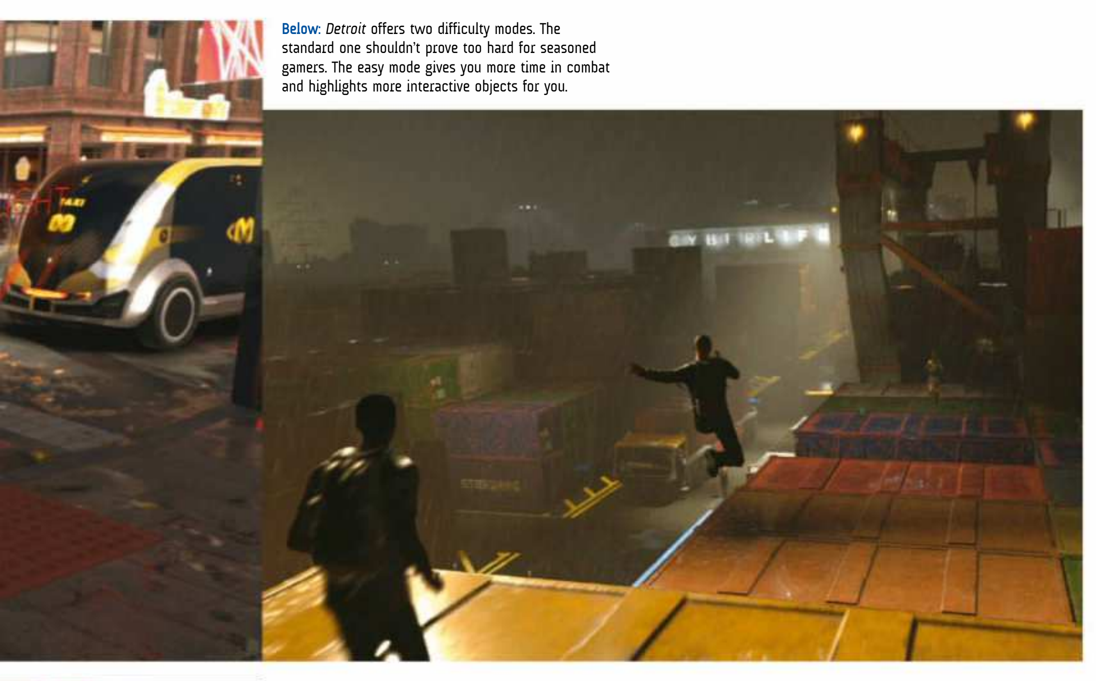






Above: It's very hard to say what is ultimately a good or bad outcome to any given scenario. Even the death of a major character could lead to important revelations that help out someone down the line. The web this game weaves is quite something.

YOU'VE ALREADY SEEN HOW NASTY THINGS CAN GET VERY QUICKLY WITH CONNOR'S ROOFTOP SHOWDOWN



Below: *Detroit* offers two difficulty modes. The standard one shouldn't prove too hard for seasoned gamers. The easy mode gives you more time in combat and highlights more interactive objects for you.

TIMELINE HIGHLIGHTS

THE BEST BITS IN THE GAME AND WHEN YOU CAN EXPECT TO SEE THEM

15 MINS

The initial panic and tension of the opening scene is probably still lingering, but *Detroit* settles into its more languid early pace pretty quickly after that.

6 HOURS

You should be more than halfway through the game at this point, and have firmly established the kind of characters Markus, Kara and Connor are.

4 DARK NIGHT

Having completed the game some time ago, you can now dip back into key scenes or give the whole game another play through to find those loose threads.



THE WIDENING VALLEY

We tend not to get too caught up in the concept of the uncanny valley, because it has always struck us as a little unfair to expect videogames to master utter realism when they are simultaneously delivering interactive entertainment that is so much more demanding than a still image or fixed camera experience. That said, Quantic Dream likes to work on the very edge of the precipice, striving for greater realism with each passing game. A new engine with *Detroit* brings fantastic new lighting, more camera control, great textures and less rubbery faces. But it's the movement that kept catching us as we played. It just feels a little too stiff at times, lacking the fluidity and naturalism of something like an Uncharted or Assassin's Creed. So, some areas to improve upon.



the formula and keeping you guessing. Over-confidence that you know what is to come can just as easily be your downfall.

Making unintentional errors through misunderstood dialogue choices was not a problem we encountered. The clarity of the instructions and options you're given through the course of the game is far more consistent than we've experienced elsewhere. We never felt as if the response we had chosen was contrary to what we had expected or hoped to give. And jumping between the three characters, you have a chance to play out very different attitudes towards the same problems. Whether you choose to play the role of a 'cold android' or allow your own humanity to seep into their behaviour, you're going to get some interesting and varied responses on screen.

What we also appreciated was the ability to play our words off against our actions. We could be the hard-assed, pragmatic investigator with Connor in some moments, but behave a little differently to that. The game seems to understand that what you say in private versus what you do in public can be very different and yet still remain consistent for the individual. It's hard to fully explain this without giving up story details, but suffice to say, if you put your foot in your mouth, you can walk it back by how you behave, and sometimes convincing someone you're something you are not gives you more options down the line.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

PATH FINDER: We had been concerned that the introduction of the path at the end of each chapter might break the pace of the experience or show us too much behind the curtain, but it actually works well, just teasing you enough to want to come back again later.

But for every step of progress it feels like there's a step back taken too. Or perhaps it might be more accurate to say that each step reveals a small shortcoming that's always been there that needs to be resolved. While animations in cutscenes and facial capture are fantastic throughout, some of the character animation in player-controlled moments is stilted and awkward. While there are fantastic new levels of detail in skin textures and in the world broadly, some of the character designs feel a little unfinished, particular with their hair, which feels like an odd thing to nitpick, but the delicate balance of immersion in a game that is reaching for something so close to naturalism is so easy to tip over.

So, is *Detroit* going to convert David Cage sceptics to Quantic Dream's way of thinking? Absolutely not. This is pure thematic pondering, melodramatic, challenging, gamified cinema-aping stuff, and that's why we like it. And we could certainly dissect its portrayal of domestic violence, civil rights and popular uprisings, but we'll leave such analysis to those better versed in the theories and facts in the real world. As a game, this is Quantic Dream at its most confident and composed. And if you've been enjoying time spent with *Life Is Strange* or the Telltale output in the last couple of years, this has plenty to offer you.

VERDICT 8/10
A TENSE, ENJOYABLE THRILLER

AKA DUNGEONS & DRAGONS II: KETCHES AND KRAKENS

Pillars Of Eternity II: Deadfire

Below: You begin the game on the trail of a god, who also happens to be a giant. What with him being quite large, it's easy to follow his trail – this isn't a swimming pool, it's a footprint – and the populated areas in his way are covered in them.

It is genuinely easy to get lost in *Pillars Of Eternity II: Deadfire*'s character creation section for an hour or so. Setting your history, race, class (single or multi), powers, culture, customising their look – it's all so in-depth and rich with detail, those who want to take everything in and consider their decisions could find themselves running out of free time to play the game before they've even really started doing so. This is an unashamedly deep, complex and delightfully nerdy CRPG for fans of the resurgent genre, as well as those who grew up with (or just got into) Dungeons & Dragons.

Following on from the events of the original, *Deadfire* picks up five years later – your base of operations has been destroyed by an awakened god (who happened to be a giant thought dead beneath your cairn), and you're out at sea chasing after him. However, to say more on the plot would ruin most of the point of the game. *Deadfire*'s story matters to things, the way you take it in, the way you read it, the way you see the differing factions and races, their motivations and disagreements, it all *matters* to you as the player in how you feel about it and how you then deal with it. For such a huge adventure – and it is considerably larger than the first game – *Deadfire* can be surprisingly personal in the tale it tells.

This is thanks in no small part to the fantastic writing present throughout, with interactions between the player and characters both important and unimportant given the right amount of care and consideration – and humour – to keep it captivating, interesting and pertinent to your experience. Yes, even the creep in the bathhouse. A huge slice of this comes from your own party, with the core characters making up your crew (you can hire 'background' and created members,

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: US
PUBLISHER: Versus Evil
DEVELOPER: Obsidian Entertainment
PRICE: £32.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: i3-2100T @ 2.50 GHz, AMD Phenom II X3 B73, 4GB RAM, Windows Vista 64-bit, ATI Radeon HD 4850 / NVIDIA GeForce 9600 GT, 45GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

DEADFIRE CAN BE SURPRISINGLY PERSONAL IN THE TALE IT TELLS



FAQs

Q. HOW LONG IS IT?
A piece of string lost at sea. That is to say, anything from 30-odd hours minimum, to over a hundred if you explore everything.

Q. THIS OR *DIVINITY 2*?
Divinity: Original Sin 2 is one of the finest RPGs ever made, so that's out recommendation – but *Deadfire* is superb in its own right.

Q. ONLY FOR GENRE FANS?
If you're well versed in the genre you'll definitely get a lot more out of it and newcomers may hit some barriers to entry.



Left: It's not easy being the puppet of the gods, but you can always argue with them. It might not necessarily turn out well for you, but you *can* argue. Below: Evoking the finest memories of *Sid Meier's Pirates!*, the seafaring sections are a fun expansion on the exploration from the first game.

Below: Ship-to-ship combat is played out in one of *Deadfire*'s surprisingly engaging turn-based 'choose your own adventure' set-ups. It's tactical, challenging and always satisfying – and if all else fails, you can just engage ramming speed.

too) proving to be a bunch of unique, intriguing and smartly written folks all with their own stories to tell, motivations driving them and personalities to learn about. Some of you will find yourselves specifically catering to crewmates if they're present for conversations, acting in ways you know they like and behaving in a manner you're sure will endear you to them. That's not something you see much of in modern RPGs, and it throws a wave of refreshing nostalgia over everything – even though it does mean you can alienate core characters.

Away from the plentiful chattering, *Deadfire* presents a few elements – all of which are fun in their own right. Combat returns as pauseable real-time battles, which will thoroughly humiliate you if you don't take full advantage of all the strategic elements on offer at higher difficulties – do look into flanking, it's very important indeed. There's exploration of both sea and land, with your customisable ship taking to the waters to discover lands old and new throughout your quest, and islands both populated and uninhabited ripe for the pillagi… *exploring*. Throw in ship-to-ship combat, played out in a turn-based fashion and able to be completed with an Errol Flynn-style boarding attack, and you're on to a winner all round. There is rarely a part of the game where you don't feel yourself being pushed on to see what comes next – you *want* to find the next island over, you *want* to check out every corner of said landmass, you *want* to talk to everyone in a town to find out which of them saw that giant god pottering about. *Deadfire* pushes you on not by demanding your time and forcing you to engage in busywork, but by providing you with huge amounts of things to do – and things you *want* to do.

ENHANCED
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

BIGGER, BETTER: *Deadfire* bumps the size up from the original game significantly. So many more settlements, dungeons and hideaways to explore makes for a much deeper, more engrossing experience.

Deadfire nails the feeling of being thoroughly nostalgic, evoking strong memories of the late Nineties or early Noughties titles like *Baldur's Gate* and *Fallout*, *Icewind Dale* and *Planescape Torment*. In that respect it fills players of a certain age with all the nostalgic warmth needed to keep you pressing on. At the same time, *Deadfire* is a very modern take on things, lacking the clunkiness and general user-unfriendliness you would find were you to go back two decades to the batch of games it takes inspiration from.

Essentially, it doesn't come across as if it's emulating a past approach – it feels very much like an evolution of the classic CRPG style. Admittedly this isn't new, *Deadfire* itself being a sequel, but it's still a genuinely nice feeling to have when playing a game: the classic, deep, engrossing role-playing aspects mixed with a simple, effective look and tweaked to add in some little modern touches that mean it's still fun to play in the modern era, as seen in the original.

Deadfire is plenty of fun whether you play it on its easiest or hardest settings, if you dip in for a few hours or stick around for dozens, should you bother to read the reams of text or just idly skip through them to the important parts. You never feel let down or short-changed, and really it's only a slight air of over-complexity and a smidge of bloat that hold it back from being the best of the best. Many will be able to look past that, by learning *Deadfire*'s intricacies, which can be difficult, and/or by avoiding the urge to explore *literally everywhere*, hard as that might be. What you're left with is yet another modern CRPG that takes a huge, brilliant step forward for the genre.

THE WHEEL KEEPS TURNING

Endgame saves can be imported to *Deadfire*, bringing with it all the major choices made through the original. If you didn't finish the first game (or just don't want to use your old save) you're also catered for, with a robust 'player history' option allowing individual choices to be selected before starting a new game.

So it's impossible to get into *Deadfire* without having played the first? No, the game goes out of its way to welcome in newbies – as well as definable (or preset) histories, jargon is explained when hovered over with the cursor, so with a bit of effort you'll never be lost. Those of us averse to reading, however, will be utterly adrift.



VERDICT 8/10
MASSIVE, OVERWHELMING, ENGAGING AND BRILLIANT

THE STATE OF THIS

State Of Decay 2

Cho, in the end, died quickly. After weeks spent under the shade of her medical tent sewing survivors' innards back inside their bodies, she suddenly became well-acquainted with her own. Where was her companion when she needed him? His back disappeared behind the pumps of a distant gas station, safe from the zombie army that sprung from nowhere. If he'd stayed, he too would have been overwhelmed. So it was just Cho, now alone, for a moment cradled almost tenderly in a juggernaut's arms before it ripped her legs from her torso.

State Of Decay 2's strength is in these moments of emergent storytelling. A run-of-the mill search for supplies can quickly go south, and the ensuing panic and tragedy (or narrow avoidance of one) will quickly pull you from your slump at the back of the sofa to the edge of your seat: feet planted, shoulders hunched, controller clutched with white knuckles.

Its weakness is in how this unpredictability sits at odds with its pre-written characters. Every survivor you play in *State Of Decay 2* comes fitted with their own backstory, motivations and RPG stats designed to fulfil what Undead Labs terms a "dynamic narrative system". In theory, each Community you play receives missions, makes choices and endures consequences based on survivors' unique experiences.

More often than not though, attempts to build believable stories are actively contradicted by in-built systems. When Cho was overrun by zombies, we were playing as Smith – a rash and impulsive survivor who'd demanded to clear an undead infestation out of boredom. When Cho died during Smith's unnecessary ego trip, his morale stats plunged. But after picking off the horde from afar, covered in his friend's blood, he whooped down the radio that the mission was a success. At that exact moment, he just so happened to gain enough influence to be promoted to hero, a position that made him electable as the Community's leader, despite his folly.

DETAILS

FORMAT: XBOX ONE
ORIGIN: PC
PUBLISHER: Undead Labs
DEVELOPER: Microsoft Studios
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4 Online
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

SNIPER GHOST WARRIOR 3



WORSE THAN



STATE OF DECAY





Below: The aim of the game is to survive, completing side missions and your primary objectives over days of play. Finish with one community, and you can start a new one on a different map.

YOUR COMMUNITY BECOMES A WAITING ROOM AS YOU BURN THROUGH SURVIVORS LIKE SO MANY RECHARGEABLE BATTERIES



FAQs

Q. CAN OTHER PLAYERS KILL?
Friendly fire is disabled, but that's not to say a Leroy Jenkins won't engineer a fatal situation.

Q. ANY CUSTOMISATION?
Your characters' appearances and clothing can't be changed.

Q. WHEN IS IT?
These events take place roughly a year-and-a-half after those of the first game.

Left: Vehicles are risky. They're ultimately the quickest way to cross a map, but they make a lot of noise.



BLOOD PLAGUE

New to State Of Decay is a sickness that cough drops ain't gonna cure. Blood Plague is spread by special types of red-eyed zombies that pop up near fleshy, pulsating blobs called Plague Hearts. Take enough damage from an infected zed, or linger too long by a Plague Heart and you'll contract the disease. Left untreated, infected survivors die and become a Plague Zombie. You know you're sick when a countdown timer appears on screen, giving you three real-time hours to find plague tissue samples and synthesise them into a cure. Destroy every Plague Heart in your town using as many explosives as you can carry to destroy the Blood Plague threat once and for all.

The poignancy of an emergent, tragic moment was undone. *State Of Decay 2* peddles a mixed message; stats suggest your actions have a price, but the rewards system celebrates success no matter the cost. This ludonarrative dissonance cheapens what other games like *This War Of Mine* manage to achieve: a sense that survival has consequences.

Despite its smart marketing, *State Of Decay 2* is more concerned with to-do lists than people. Shelves must be stocked and vehicles mended, huge rucksacks of fuel need to be sourced and ferried back to base, petty local disputes between enclaves require resolution, medical gardens wilt with no attention, undead infestations multiply if left unchecked and distress calls on the radio must be answered as soon as possible.

Like so many open worlds, however, these responsibilities fall squarely on your shoulders. You are the world's only moving part - and frustratingly, it's impossible to fit everything on your to-do list into a day. When not under your control, every character's approach to surviving is lackadaisical. One key problem is, aside from squabbling and occasionally sourcing consumable snacks, they mostly sit on their rumps around the base. The only indication of a deeper level of society simulation are the +1s and -3s that ping when a randomly generated event occurs off screen and shuffles the community stats.

Your community becomes an ostensible waiting room, with each character patiently twiddling thumbs as you burn through their companions like so many rechargeable batteries until a final flick of X takes them with you on to the field. Your home soon feels like a cardboard cutout.

Another crinkle in *State Of Decay 2*'s promised tapestry of a rich world is the skill system. Cardio, shooting and fighting abilities are all upgraded through repeated use, while useful new skills like computing or construction can be learned by sourcing textbooks. 12 hours in, however, you'll naturally have trained most of your survivors into the same cookie-cutter scavenger-fighter.

The game tries to combat this by allowing you to specialise when a character maxes out one skill. Will you upgrade your shooting to reduce recoil or improve steadiness? But the reality is each zombie encounter boils down to the same lather, rinse, repeat strategies: draw out stragglers, pick them off individually and take out the big ones with explosives. That calls for a very specific set of skills, and a community of so many Liam Neesons.

Then there's the issue that *State Of Decay 2* wouldn't look out of place on an Xbox 360. Low-resolution textures pop in randomly, clipping problems turn high-stakes encounters into slapstick comedy and every swing of the camera is obfuscated by motion blur.

State Of Decay 2 is at its best when it surprises you. Its compelling 'let's ransack one more house' game loop shines when a seemingly safe building contains a Feral zombie. To its credit, Undead Labs has created a game that knows how to crank up the tension with the high stakes of permadeath, and punishes you for getting complacent.

Still, these moments are short lived, and often undone by bugs or poor dialogue. Every map is peppered with the kernels of some brilliant ideas and packed with some genuinely intriguing systems, but these are choked by ceaseless activities that can't be farmed out to other characters or online pals. *State Of Decay 2* falls short of its promise, instead offering the kind of brainless, repetitive experience that turns you into a de facto zombie.

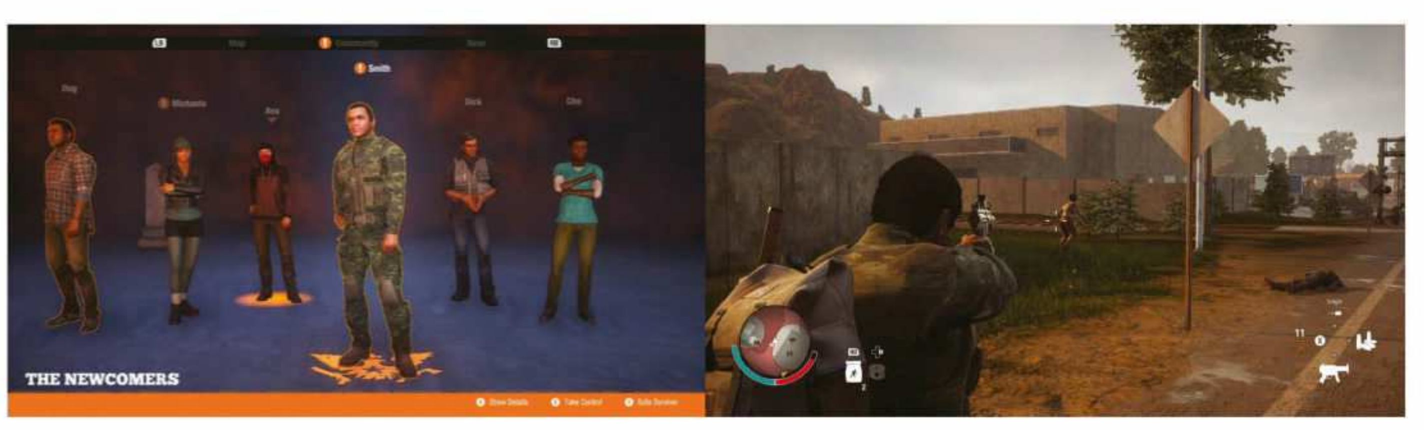
MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LOCK ON: Splatting zombie brains is hard when you can't target them during melee combat.
STORY TIME: Environmental storytelling would make the world far more interesting.



VERDICT 5/10
A GREAT IDEA THAT MISSES THE MARK



SAIL AWAY, SAIL AWAY, SAIL AWAY

FAR: Lone Sails

We've done this before. We've stood in the centre of a screen, a single speck of colour in a monochrome world, pressing ever onwards as the screen scrolls right. Our avatar, forever faceless and voiceless, gives nothing away as they scurry stage right – always right – seeking an escape.

It's hard not to make comparisons with the 2D side-scrollers that have come before it – *Little Nightmares, Inside, Limbo* – but while those games press a damp blanket of despair upon you, this time it's different. For all the similarities it shares with those games, *FAR: Lone Sails* is an unadulterated beacon of light that balances style and substance in a way rarely paralleled by its peers, indie or otherwise.

Okomotive's summary of *FAR: Lone Sails* is almost as nondescript as its name, though. It's called "an atmospheric vehicle adventure game" – a delightful statement that tells you nothing, let's face it – but *F:LS* is so, *so* much more than this. Yes, it has a vehicle, but it's also a gentle, delicate 2.5D adventure game stuffed with ingenuity. Yes, it's atmospheric, but that's not enough to properly convey its languid warmth, the shrewd design or its cyberpunk-esque aesthetic.

You're a teeny red blob in an otherwise monochromatic palette, scrabbling around your boat-caravan-truck contraption. To proceed, you need to maintain the vehicle's energy levels, which means scavenging for supplies as you trek ever eastwards, gathering boxes, barrels, books and so on, to throw into the furnace.

At this point you're probably thinking that this is a resource management game, which it is , a bit, but it's *so* much more than that, too. Because as you progress, your milometer quietly ticking away, you'll find nifty upgrades for your boat-thing: a vacuum that sucks up those supplies without leaving the vehicle, and sails that enable you to coast on wind-power alone. You're told nothing – there are no hints – but the more time you spend with this peculiar vehicle the more you'll notice things, like how the rooftop flag only twitches when there's a strong breeze, or the health gauges that indicate what machinery might fail next.

Yes, things can go wrong – we learned the hard way what happens if you leave a fire burning unchecked – but the autosaves are kind enough, and the puzzles are perplexing, but they are very rarely frustrating. It's not a long game – you'll only need four or five hours, and that's being generous – and the bits at night are frustrating, especially if you're scrambling around in the dark for something to chuck into the furnace. But that's all the criticism we can find, really. *FAR: Lone Sails* looks, sounds and *feels* stunning in almost every way and it's sublime to play, too with its core loop of tasks and interesting surprises. Don't miss it.




VERDICT 9/10

ONE OF THE BEST THINGS WE'VE PLAYED ALL YEAR

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: Switzerland
PUBLISHER: Mixtvision
DEVELOPER: Okomotive
PRICE: £11.39
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7+ (64-bit), Intel Core 2 Quad Q6600, AMD FX 8120, 4 GB RAM, NVIDIA GTX 460, AMD HD6570, DirectX 11, 3GB HDD
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

LITTLE NIGHTMARES



WORSE THAN



INSIDE

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

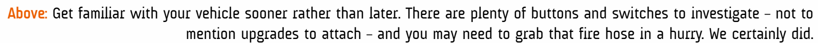
STYLE WITH SUBSTANCE: Get ready to overuse your screenshot button – there are some truly stunning set-pieces – and be sure to take the time to look around and absorb *FAR: Lone Sails*' subtle environmental storytelling.



Above: Never be afraid to have a good root around, especially as you can usually uncover bonus furnace fuel if you're observant enough. An invisible rubber band will gently guide you back if you stray too far.



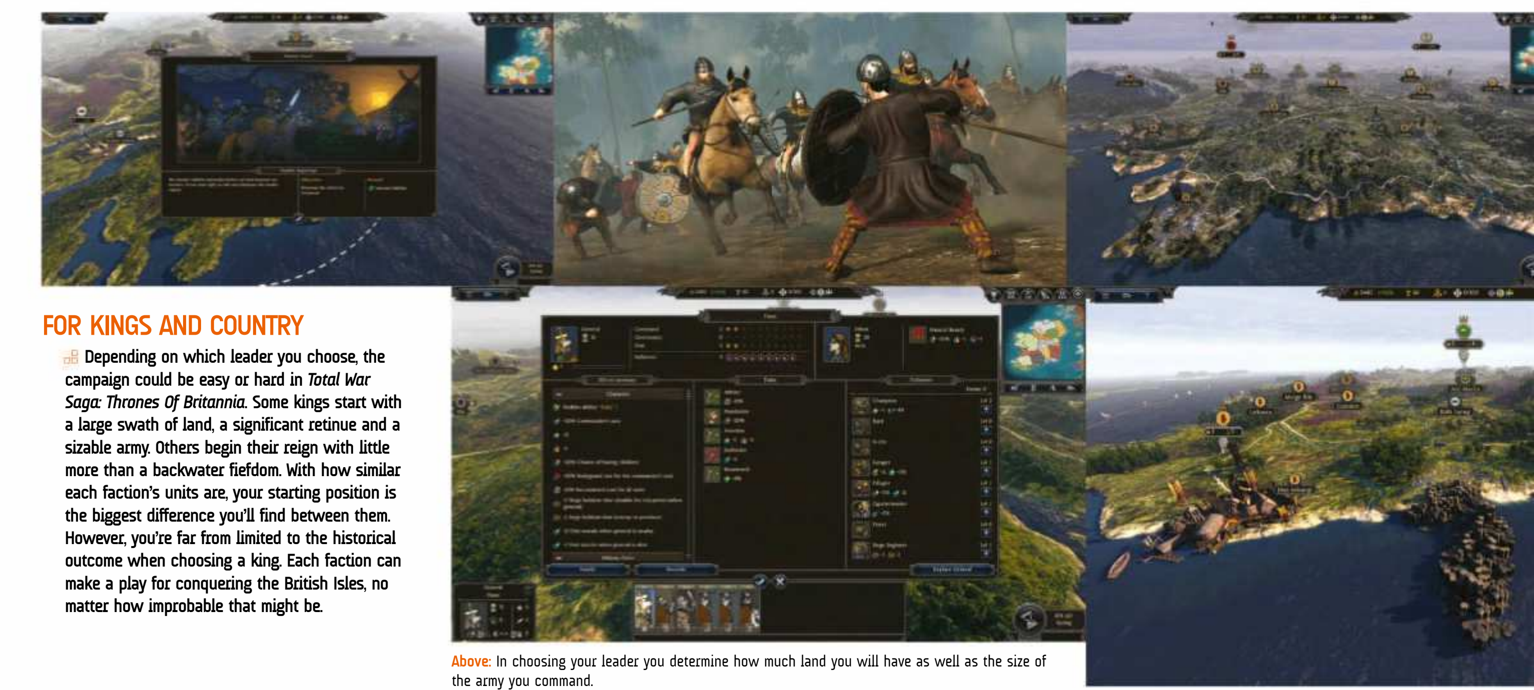




Above: Get familiar with your vehicle sooner rather than later. There are plenty of buttons and switches to investigate – not to mention upgrades to attach – and you may need to grab that fire hose in a hurry. We certainly did.

THRONES OF BRITANNIA SUFFERS FOR ITS SIMPLICITY, BUT IT BRINGS SOME NEW IDEAS TO THE TABLE WITHOUT TARNISHING THE MAIN SERIES

Above: As ever, the number of troops you can see on screen at any one time remains impressive, giving you some amazing scale to your battles.



Above: In choosing your leader you determine how much land you will have as well as the size of the army you command.

FOR KINGS AND COUNTRY

Depending on which leader you choose, the campaign could be easy or hard in *Total War Saga: Thrones Of Britannia*. Some kings start with a large swath of land, a significant retinue and a sizable army. Others begin their reign with little more than a backwater fiefdom. With how similar each faction's units are, your starting position is the biggest difference you'll find between them. However, you're far from limited to the historical outcome when choosing a king. Each faction can make a play for conquering the British Isles, no matter how improbable that might be.

THE DREAD AND ENVY OF THEM ALL

Total War Saga: Thrones Of Britannia

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Creative Assembly
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-2 online
MINIMUM SPEC: Windows 7 64Bit, Intel® Core™ 2 Duo 3.0Ghz, 5GB RAM, NVIDIA GTX 460 1GB, AMD Radeon HD 5770 1GB, Intel HD4000 @720p, 30 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN
TOTAL WAR: ARENA



WORSE THAN
TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER

FAQs

Q. BETTER OPTIMISATION?
Yes, *Thrones Of Britannia* is one of the first entries in the series to run well on a diverse range of PC hardware.

Q. ARE THERE VIKINGS?
Vikings are one of the playable factions vying for control over the British Isles.



Q. DOES IT RUN ON CREATIVE ASSEMBLY'S WARHAMMER'S ENGINE?
No, *Thrones Of Britannia* runs on a modified version of the older engine used for *Total War: Attila.*



Streamlining is one of the biggest appeals of *Thrones Of Britannia*, and possibly its greatest handicap. This is the first game in the new Total War Saga spin-off series that is meant to be a more scaled-down experience with the focus being on a particular time and place in history. Instead of a massive map of Europe, you're presented with a magnified (compared to previous entries) version of the British Isles circa 878 AD.

Some fans have felt like there's an over emphasis of logistics and strategy at the expense of the tactical level battles the series is so well known for and in many ways *Total War Saga: Thrones Of Britannia* aims to focus the experience and place more importance on moving and commanding armies and less on the ins-and-outs of what it takes to raise and maintain them. The bureaucracy of war has been important to the Total War series, but much of that has now been stripped away.

Thankfully what it hasn't stripped away is its strength at portraying the scale of war. The Total War series has excelled in this area, more than any other franchise. Total War doesn't aim for the abstract when it comes to troop numbers. Instead, thousands of soldiers clash and die on the battlefield in bloody glory. But the balance may still be off as Creative Assembly has over-steered in its course correction.

The 'Thrones' in Thrones of Britannia refers to the fact that around 878 AD just about everyone in the British Isles had declared themselves king of whatever ground they happened to be standing on at the time. There are ten playable factions including the Welsh, Gaelic clans, Vikings and Anglo-Saxons. Each of the factions has their own unique units and mechanics, but for the most part, plays the same. One of the first signs that *Thrones Of Britannia* is more limited in scope is that the different kingdoms don't feature any significantly different units or tactics. If you're coming off of *Total War: Warhammer*, where each race had distinctly varying play-styles from one another, this will more than likely be a source of disappointment for you and we would sympathise with your feelings.

The biggest differences between *Thrones Of Britannia* and previous titles in the series can be found on the strategic map. Running your kingdom has been significantly reduced in complexity to allow combat to occur more easily and more frequently. Settlements are now limited to one building with linear upgrades, and no longer hold garrisons. Much more emphasis is placed on your larger cities, and protecting them is essential since a settlement can now be captured by just walking into it if an army isn't stationed in it.

Previously, to recruit a unit you had to raise it in the town containing the appropriate building. Since settlements no longer have multiple building slots, you might think you have to go all the way back to major cities to recruit anything other than a basic Spearman. That's not the case. Unit recruitment has been completely revamped. Instead of paying a recruitment cost and waiting x amount of turns as your units are 'built' things are a bit more dynamic.

In the most significant (and in our opinion the best) change from previous games, in *Thrones Of Britannia* if you have the cash and free unit slots, all troops take one turn to build. However, they don't start at full strength. Instead, it takes several turns for a unit to muster up to full force. This allows you to deploy armies to the field quickly and keeps gameplay going instead of having to wait around until you've got a full stack. You can move out right away and start progressing towards offensive or defensive objectives while your troops muster. The balance is maintained because you still have to be wary of engagements until your army is at full strength.

Thrones Of Britannia also does away with some of the other strategic elements of previous Total War games. A lot of the diplomacy is simplified, particularly trade agreements. One of the more controversial deletions is the Agent system. Agents (Heroes in *Total War: Warhammer*) are no longer individual units. Also, the leaders of your armies are no longer levelled up via a skill tree. Instead, they gain traits based on their actions as well as on their environments. You can also assign them followers that can give them modifiers. While this is an admittedly more streamlined system, we felt that it made each leader feel a bit too similar and removed a lot of the customisation options that had made building your generals worth the investment in older games.

The overall leader of your faction still levels up, and you can spend points split between Command, Governance, Zeal, Influence and Loyalty. Your factions leader remains a unit you can command on the battlefield as well, which we warn you, can have dire consequences. Your kingdom is filled with nobles and vassals that you have to keep loyal because if they lose too much loyalty, they'll rise up and rebel. It can actually feel a bit like *Crusader Kings*-lite in some situations. Your king may die in combat, and multiple pretenders may claim your throne, or a king's heir may not hold the loyalty he did and various nobles may rise up in rebellion. All this puts a bit more character behind the need to curry public favour instead of having a random rebel general suddenly appear when the people's resentment gets too high.

Thrones Of Britannia suffers for its simplicity, but it brings some new ideas to the table without tarnishing the main series. You get a leaner, more focused experience, which is offset by the game's lower cost. It's a bite-sized version of a full Total War game and, as such, it won't hold your attention as long, but fans of the series should give it a shot. It's also a decent introduction to Total War, but you're really much better off sinking your teeth into something like *Total War: Attila* or *Rome II* to get a full picture of what the franchise has to offer.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

GRAND STRATEGY: Many of the strategic elements of previous Total War games have been simplified or removed. Keeping things like forced marches, razing settlements, trade agreements and agents would have made time on the map between battles more interesting.



VERDICT 7/10
AN INTERESTING BUT LIMITED SPIN-OFF

IT'S WORTH MECHIN' THE EFFORT

BattleTech

The fog of war that clouds the unexplored regions of the maps you must negotiate in *BattleTech* is an apt metaphor for the experience of playing this game. It is hard to get your bearings at first. You might feel lost. Disorientated. You can't quite see what this game is supposed to be and question whether you're going to be rewarded for taking the time to plough on into the unknown to find what might be hidden there. Stick with it, however, and the fog will clear. *BattleTech* will reveal itself in glorious clarity.

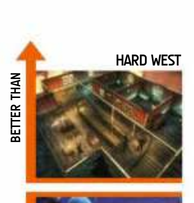
BattleTech is a turn-based strategy game where you take control of a 'lance' – a group of four mechs. You move them around large open battlefields, using your tactical nous to try and outmanoeuvre and outgun your opponents. That's no mean feat, given how much there is to consider. The structural elements of your mech – the torso, the arms, the legs – are each protected by their own stack of armour, making positioning key. You can try and flank to attack the weaker rear armour of a mech, or target specific regions, like a mech's arm, to blow it off and take a powerful weapon with it, hampering that mech's attacking potential in the next round as well as bringing it closer to destruction. But before taking that shot, you must consider the buffs and debuffs that might impact on your plan. If the unit moved in its last turn, it will be granted an 'evasion' buff relative to how far it travelled, making it harder to hit. If the mech has 'braced', it will have the 'guarded' and 'entrenched' statuses, mitigating damage from the front and sides and reducing stability damage respectively. Then there is the environment to consider. If the mech is in an area of forest it will be granted the 'cover' buff, or if it is on rough terrain it will be more susceptible to stability damage. If the latter is the case, you might want to unleash a hail of fire from a mech equipped with weapons that do high stability damage and then follow up with a 'called shot' to the mech's leg to try and knock it down and leave it vulnerable on your next turn. But wait. If you're on a mission in

DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: N/A
PUBLISHER: Paradox Interactive
DEVELOPER: Harebrained Schemes
PRICE: £34.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1 (2 online)
MINIMUM SPEC: 64-bit Windows 7 or higher, Intel Core i3-2105 or AMD Phenom II X3 720, 8 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 560 Ti or AMD ATI Radeon HD 5870, 30 GB available space
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

HARD WEST





XCOM 2

WORSE THAN



Above: In desert environments it can be worth turning off weapons with a lower percentage chance of hitting before taking a shot to prevent overheating, but on a snowy stage like this, you need have no such worries.

Below: Managing your mercenary crew is often about how to best use your time. Journeys between systems can be long, so it's best to make those trips when you've got mechs to repair and pilots to heal.

STICK WITH IT AND THE FOG WILL CLEAR. BATTLETECH WILL REVEAL ITSELF IN GLORIOUS CLARITY



FAQs

Q. IS IT LIKE XCOM?
There are significant differences – *BattleTech* doesn't use a grid system, for example – but you'll probably like it if you enjoyed XCOM.

Q. ISN'T *BATTLETECH* A BOARD GAME?
Yes. The game is based on the board game and draws some of its ideas from its mechanics and fiction.

Q. WILL I SPEND AGES CUSTOMISING?
You can spend a long time fiddling with mech builds, but it's not something you have to do to progress.

Below: Random events occur while you're travelling in space. The way you decide to respond can impact on things like crew morale, mech repair times and your bank balance.



PICK UP A PILOT

It's easy to focus on the mechs and all the cool guns you can attach to them, but the importance of the people you hire to pilot them shouldn't be neglected. As you level up your pilots, their improved stats will help you get more out of your mechs. They also gain active and passive special abilities that can be of crucial importance in battle. Sensor Lock, for example, is great to use at the beginning of a turn to remove 'evasion' from an enemy mech and make it easier to hit for the rest of your team. Breaching Shot, on the other hand, can take a mech that thinks it's safe by surprise, ignoring the 'cover' and 'guarded' statuses when you attack with a single weapon.

the desert, will firing a volley of shots risk your mech overheating? And if you fail to knock the mech to the ground will you be exposed to a deadly counter attack?

If you haven't got the hint by now, *BattleTech* is a complicated game. A slow start, a tutorial that doesn't tell you everything you need to know (which may well be for the best given how much there is to cover) and a sometimes-unintuitive UI give you neither the tools nor will to adequately unravel that complexity. It is overwhelming at first. A chore, even. But it is worth persevering. Once things fall into place and you get a handle on what everything means and how you need to approach different situations, *BattleTech*'s vast array of options and systems begin to tantalise, rather than daunt. A fascinating array of tactical possibilities unfurl before you, lending the game's combat a strategic richness that makes it incredibly rewarding. You revel in coordinating the abilities of your mechs and pilots to viscously tear enemies to shreds, gleefully punish your opponent's poor strategic moves, smugly self-congratulate yourself for neutering the otherwise deadly strengths of your attackers to keep your team safe.



WORLDWIDE
TAKING GAMING ONLINE

LEARNING THROUGH FALIURE: *BattleTech*'s online Skirmish mode is a great way of being exposed to new tactics. An encounter where an opponent used two speedy Firestarter mechs to overheat our bigger and slower mechs was an eye-opener.

Missions are wrapped up in a compelling space-mercenary management sim that gives the game a nice sense of progress. Your ultimate goal is to help return a deposed monarch to the throne as part of a rote tale about warring houses of space nobles. But a mercenary's gotta eat, so in between those key story missions, you travel across the galaxy, taking on jobs to earn money and salvage that you can use to upgrade your ship's capabilities, recruit new pilots, repair, unlock and build new mechs and cover the running costs of your ever-growing operation. This section of the game is less complicated than the game's combat sections and that works in its favour, providing a nice change of pace and intensity. You're still making important and interesting decisions, but you're doing so at a breezier clip in a system where gratification is more immediate.

We do have some reservations about the game's structure, however. Side missions can be repetitive, frequently dumping you on a map and telling you to fight another team of mechs. The simplicity of a routine 'blow stuff up' mission that doesn't stretch you too far can provide a nice mental break and give you a chance to experiment with new mechs. However, when you get to the more intricately crafted and cerebrally challenging story missions, you realise that there's unrealised potential in *BattleTech*'s cookie-cutter side-content. You may also find that you feel inadequately prepared to deal with the challenge before you after drifting through side missions on auto-pilot and suddenly finding yourself having to completely rethink your approach.

Indeed, we've encountered a couple of frustrating difficulty spikes, both in story and side missions. Missions do have difficulty ratings attached, but there's a degree of randomness which means they can be trickier than expected. We must emphasise that for the most part this was fine, but we did encounter situations where the challenge was so wildly out of whack with the stated rating that it felt unfair. Developer Harebrained Studio has already acknowledged there's a problem here, so hopefully there will be adjustments in future patches.

BattleTech forces you to soldier through some rough patches to get to the good stuff. Just be assured that it's worth the journey to get to those more assured moments.

VERDICT 8/10
A TACTICALLY RICH AND REWARDING SPACE-MERC-MECH-SIM



NOT SUCH A CROM-Y TIME

Conan Exiles

If absolutely nothing else, this game somehow manages to perfectly capture the tone of the 1982 *Conan The Barbarian* film. And what's not to love about that? It's the music that really does it, oh-so obviously emulating the score of that film but the game does a lot of legwork too. Even if it's not always able to deliver.

Conan Exiles sees you in the role of, well, an exile. Nailed to a cross and left to die at the edge of the world with nothing but rags to your name (and if the nudity filter is turned off, then not even those). Customisation is a little basic but you did get to pick fun things like a religion, which will determine powers later in the game. You also get a random set of crimes that explain your exile and we had to giggle at "corrupting the youth".

After being freed by a Conan lookalike, you're then let loose without much hand holding. Thanks to a world that's hand crafted instead of randomly generated, you're still guided about by ruins and landmarks as well as given a few mini objectives to take you through all the necessary steps of survival. It's all pretty straightforward if you have even a passing familiarity with the survival game genre: eat, sleep… all that jazz.

The first real obstacle of *Conan Exiles* is, unfortunately, the user interface. Especially on PS4, those menus aren't just obtuse at first, the text is preposterously tiny. It's an issue that never goes away and we can only hope it gets improved with patches. For now though, it's a constant challenge.

It's a shame because outside that it's an incredibly well put together survival game. Polished to a higher standard than usual and it's got atmosphere and character, two things often lacking in similar titles. This feels like a world instead of a sandbox and that makes your adventures in it feel all the more authentic.

Of course, it still *is* a sandbox and you'll almost immediately be stumbling into absurdity. Like the time we took on a whole camp of baddies, naked with nothing but our fists because we couldn't figure out how to craft a weapon.

You will improve pretty fast. Levelling up gives you two resources. Firstly, points to spend on skill trees that can boost your stats like health and stamina. Typical RPG stuff.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, PC
ORIGIN: Norway
PUBLISHER: Funcom
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £33.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 40
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

Below: You start out with absolutely nothing. It doesn't take much to get yourself an axe and some clothes but it's a long way to the fancy armour and weapons; longer if you're trying to do it alone.



Below: Climbing takes a leaf out of *Zelda Breath Of The Wild*'s playbook and lets you scale just about any surface so long as you've got the stamina for it. It really opens up the world for exploration.



Then there's the knowledge tree, where you can unlock new recipes for weapons, tools and, of course, building structures.

Base building is a core component of the game that's well put together. You can snap buildings to the terrain with ease and if you've some imagination you can begin building all sorts of inventive bases for yourself. And you'll need one to begin constructing better weapons and armour. As good as it is though, the need for base building does

Right: *Conan Exiles* sets itself apart from other survival games with a real sense of place. The world is full of evocative landmarks that quietly evoke a fantastical world. It can look spectacular at times too.



THIS FEELS LIKE A WORLD INSTEAD OF A SANDBOX AND THAT MAKES YOUR ADVENTURES IN IT FEEL ALL THE MORE AUTHENTIC



BETTER THAN

ARK: SURVIVAL EVOLVED



WORSE THAN

GOD OF WAR

FAQs

Q. CAN YOU CRUSH YOUR ENEMIES AND SEE THEM DRIVEN BEFORE YOU?

Yep! And you can lasso them too!

Q. CAN YOU HEAR THE LAMENTATIONS OF THEIR WOMEN?

You'll have to settle for their swearing over voice chat.

Q. WHAT IS THE RIDDLE OF STEEL?

No idea, but best find out before Crom sorts you out.

AN AGE UNDREAMED OF

One of the most impressive things about *Conan Exiles* is its world. Not only truly massive it's also wonderfully varied. You'll start out in the desert and spend many hours here before seeing anything else; however, waiting for you deeper in the game are much less arid climates. There are jungles and rolling highlands, forests too and each of those has a whole set of its own monsters. Much farther in you might reach the frozen wasteland at the top of the map with mammoths and all sorts of classic wintry goodness. Survive that and you'll make it to a volcanic hellhole that really is only for the absolute survival game masochists.



feel a little at odds with the adventurous nature of the game. It's hard not to just wish to be a roaming nomad in this rich world, stumbling from one adventure to the next as Conan would. Instead, you've got to commit to building some base of operations and that feels like a lost opportunity to fully deliver on the fantasy of the source material.

The base building does let *Conan Exiles* become something more epic though, escalating into clans battling over territory with sprawling fortresses. Building a massive base isn't quite enough, you'll need underlings to staff it and produce your weapons. This is where the game's thrall system comes in. Essentially, you can capture and enslave NPCs, dragging them by rope to your base and break them on the Wheel Of Pain. Then they'll serve you and depending on their background, will give you access to different weapons and structures. Of course, while slavery fits into the setting it does feel a bit uncomfortable going around partaking, so you might prefer to get by on your own.

The real reward for committing to a base is the Avatars. That religion you chose at the beginning? That allows you to construct an altar. Bring enough to the table and you'll be able to summon and control an avatar of your chosen god. Giant walking statues, huge slithering snakes… each one is a bit special to see in motion. Whether you're the one in control, kicking down walls with ease or you're the one caught underneath, the arrival of an avatar is a spectacular moment in a genre too often concerned with the mundane.

You can play solo, offline and with friends too. There's no need to jump into a server with a bunch of strangers. You will likely miss out on much of *Exiles* biggest moments but the great thing about it is that it still feels like a world you can have adventures in. There are ghosts to meet to find lost treasure, dungeons to explore and enemy strongholds to conquer.

In fact, being a lone wolf in a busy online server, whilst tough, feels especially rewarding. The presence of clans and other players just invites more outcomes into what is a very good story generator. The idea of sword and sorcery, a less epic kind of fantasy where one small story rolls into another, is perfectly captured here thanks to a mix of survival genre mechanics, large scale online elements and a world that has secrets, dungeons and monsters. It's an unlikely route to capturing that spirit but when it all comes together, it really works.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LESS CONSTRUCTION, MORE CRUSHING: The ability to really just scavenge what you need as you go would be great.

MY KINGDOM FOR A HORSE: Mounts would make travelling long distance a bit more fun.

VERDICT 8/10

A SURVIVAL GAME THAT EMBRACES ADVENTURE


Sometimes Yoku will propel himself into closed off areas dedicated purely to pinball gameplay. Use the flippers and your skill to collect as much fruit as you can, because you'll need it in order to progress in the open game world.

DON'T FLIP OUT

Yoku's Island Express

When a style of gameplay becomes so established it receives official sub-genre status, it can be difficult to innovate successfully. Yet *Yoku's Island Express* manages to do just that to the Metroidvania sub-genre.

Like any action platformer game, *Yoku's Island Express* drops you into an open map that you have to explore and re-explore with new abilities in order to progress. It's the integration of some seriously creative pinball gameplay that makes exploration feel thrilling and unique.

Pinball bumpers are located throughout the open world to help you explore, but there are also closed-off pinball puzzle areas where you hit switches, destroy obstacles, engage in boss battles and forge new paths. You also find large amounts of the game's currency – fruit – that is used to unlock new bumpers so you can propel Yoku into new areas.

Visually, the game is stunning. This isn't the garish and loud pinball backdrop we're used to. Instead, the two-dimensional island of Mokumana feels very natural and alive, with painted backdrops that range from lush forests to snowy mountain tops. Dotted around the world is a varied cast of endearing characters, most of whom want to add another item to your to-do list.

He doesn't say much, but Yoku manages to be the most endearing of all. It's probably down to the way he pushes his little ball (which doesn't, thankfully, appear to be actual dung) around the world and clings to it when he's bouncing off bumpers and flying through the air. Yoku can't die, which takes a great deal of stress out of the fast-paced pinball sections. But he can fall through flippers into thickets of thorns. Every time we hurt Yoku this way we gasped in dismay, which says a lot about how cute he is, since we've sent other protagonists hurtling off cliff edges in pursuit of a collectable without wincing.

The controls are smooth and extremely satisfying to use, particularly as every bumper is colour-coded blue and/or orange to indicate a shoulder button on your controller. Everything is intuitive, and your next step is always clear. It does, however, still take some skill and patience, particularly the pinball areas.

It took a lot to stop ourselves rage quitting when we missed our mark for the millionth time; when you're backtracking a lot as part of gameplay, getting stuck in a pinball area can quickly start to feel claustrophobic and aggravating.

The fact that Yoku is always moving in these areas, however, really helps retain the flow of action. And when you do manage to flip perfectly it's extremely satisfying and you'll love Yoku and his island all the more. It manages a reasonable balance between this melding of styles.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

A SLUG VACUUM: It's exactly what it sounds like: a handy tool that lets you suck up slugs. Unlike a regular vacuum, though, this one lets you weaponise what you've picked up.

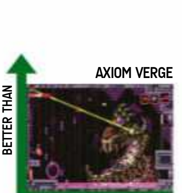
DETAILS



FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: Switch, PC, PS4
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: Team17
DEVELOPER: Villa Gorilla
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

AXIOM VERGE





ORI AND THE BLIND FOREST

WORSE THAN



VERDICT 7/10

A CLEVER, BUT NOT SEAMLESS, MIX OF GENRES

RETRO

NO.201



BEHIND THE SCENES
100
THE LION KING

No engine, no team, no details from Disney and only a matter of months to make it; **games™** discovers the impossibility of how Westwood turned *The Lion King* into one of the most beloved licensed games



GAME-CHANGERS
106
RESIDENT EVIL 4

When Capcom looked to reinvent its survival horror shooter it inadvertently set a new benchmark for third-person shooters too. We reflect on its massive impact on the industry

94
THE RETRO GUIDE TO
KONAMI ARCADE GAMES

We look back to when the Japanese developer was one of the leading players in the 2D-obsessed arcade industry and the games that helped to establish it a publishing powerhouse

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THE RETRO GUIDE TO...
KONAMI ARCADE GAMES

We look back to when the Japanese developer was one of the leading players in the 2D-obsessed arcade industry

WHEN KONAMI RECENTLY announced that it would begin focusing on the lucrative mobile market instead of traditional console games there was uproar from the videogame community, but ultimately the announcement was just Konami being Konami. After all, this was a company that started off in 1969 as a jukebox repairer and rental service. It gave that up in the late Seventies when it moved into arcade videogames, and it's looked for good opportunities to expand its business ever since.

In addition to making console games and the aforementioned mobile titles, Konami also creates the successful Yu-Gi-Oh! trading card game and runs health and physical fitness clubs across Japan, as well as pachinko and pachislot machines. It remains a dominant player in the industry, and it's behind a number of big franchises, including Bomberman, Metal Gear, Silent Hill, Frogger and Castlevania. For the purpose of this feature, though, we'll be concentrating on its early arcade games, focusing on the many 2D games that helped turn it into a dominant force during the 16- and 32-bit period. So join us as we replay some of its most beloved arcade games. How many of the following do you remember?

SPACE KING 1978

KONAMI

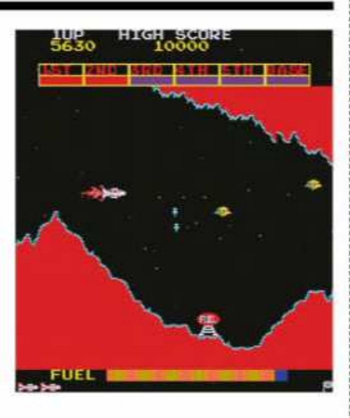


In the embryonic days of videogames it wasn't always easy to come up with your own exciting game ideas, so it made more sense to just 'borrow' someone else's. One of Konami's earliest games was what we could generously refer to as an homage to Taito's *Space Invaders*.

It's admittedly a slightly nicer looking effort, thanks to some more detailed visuals, but it's otherwise virtually identical to Taito's game, right down to the mothership that occasionally zips across the top of the screen and the endless march of invaders, which gets faster as more of them are shot down.

Konami would do exactly the same thing the following year with *Space King 2*, but it's an even more brazen effort, featuring virtually identical sprites to Taito's own sequel, *Space Invaders 2*. Fortunately for Konami, it soon began to stand on its own two feet. Greatness was just around the corner…





SCRAMBLE 1981

KONAMI

1981 is considered by many to be a golden year for arcade games. One of Konami's best from the year is *Scramble*, which was one of the first shoot-'em-ups to feature forced scrolling. Taking place across a continually changing cityscape, it features a fantastic risk vs reward mechanic where you must destroy cylinders to top up your ever-decreasing fuel. Despite its success, it was only ported to the Vectrex and Tomy Tutor (although countless clones did appear on home systems).

AMIDAR 1981

KONAMI

This enjoyable take on the maze genre tasks you with running around a set number of squares and rectangles and filling them in while avoiding numerous enemies. If you fill in all four corners of the level you'll gain temporary invincibility and can chase the normally impervious enemies. You can otherwise avoid enemies by forcing them to jump so you can run under them. Fast, fun and frantic.





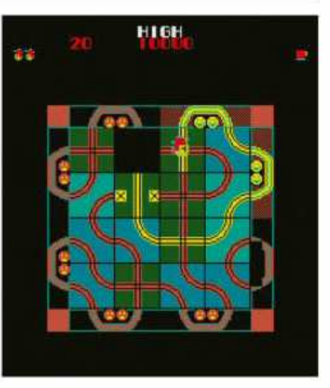


FROGGER 1981

KONAMI

Frogger was one of Konami's earliest success stories and has been ported across to countless home systems over the years. The aim is simplicity in itself, requiring you to cross a busy road and river without getting hit by traffic or falling into the water (why your frog can't swim is never fully explained). Get five frogs to safety and you're able to move to the next stage. It was succeeded by numerous sequels.





LOCO-MOTION 1982

KONAMI

This intriguing game is essentially an update of the old wooden and plastic sliding-block puzzle games. The action is viewed from above and features a series of tracks that need to be assembled so your train can visit nearby stations and pick up passengers. Annoyingly, your train continuously moves, so you have to ensure it doesn't run into any barriers or the edge of an empty square as you'll lose a life. It's tough, but hard to stop playing.

POOYAN 1982

KONAMI

This entertaining action game revolves around a mama pig trying to protect her baby piglets from a gang of hungry wolves. The first stage sees the wolves descending from a tree on balloons, leaving mama pig to shoot them down. Should she miss them, they'll steal her babies. The next level has the wolves ascending upwards so they can push a boulder on to the protective mother. It even throws in a few bonus stages, too.





TIME PILOT 1982

KONAMI

Made by Yoshiki Okamoto before he moved to Capcom and created hits like *1942* and *Street Fighter II*, *Time Pilot* is an excellent little blaster that has you shooting down a set number of enemies that attack you from all directions. Once cleared, you shift to a new time zone, complete with tougher adversaries.

GYRUSS 1983

KONAMI

This is another superb shooter from Yoshiki Okamoto. It plays like a cross between *Galaga* and *Tempest*, featuring the fast-moving waves of the former and the forced perspective of the latter. It also features some superb rock-fused renditions of classical music if you needed further reasons to play it.







TRACK & FIELD 1983

KONAMI

Konami's arcade game was the bane of arcade operators everywhere, as it required you to furiously bash buttons in order to build up enough speed in each event. There are six on offer, including Long and High Jump, and all require stamina and great timing to master. It also features a nice rendition of Chariots Of Fire.

MIKIE 1984

KONAMI

This multi-tiered game has Mikie running around a school in search of hearts. Along the way he's chased by his angry teacher and other faculty staff, and must use headbutts and sports balls to fend them off. The Japanese version takes place in a workplace rather than a school and features chiptunes of *A Hard Day's Night* and *Twist And Shout*.



HYPER SPORTS 1984

KONAMI

Konami's sequel to *Track & Field* features the same game mechanics from the original as well as extremely similar-looking sprite designs and graphics. It's arguably a far better game, though, as the chosen sports are a lot more varied and interesting to play.

While button bashing still features prominently throughout the seven available events (which include swimming, skeet shooting, archery and triple jump), there's a great deal of skill required, particularly on the likes of skeet shooting and archery. It also popped up as an event on the popular kids show *First Class*.





GRADIUS 1985

KONAMI

Despite having an extremely innovative power-up system (picking up icons selects a new weapon that you can choose to add to your ship), few games bothered to copy it. Their loss was Konami's gain, and a fusion of imaginative levels and challenging bosses led to countless sequels, including spin-off, *Parodius*.

GREEN BERET 1985

KONAMI

Also known as *Rush 'N Attack*, this extremely violent run-and-gun is unusual for its distinctive Cold War theme that sees you rushing behind enemy lines to save various POWs before they're executed by a firing squad. Rather foolishly you're armed only with a very effective knife, and it's one of the few arcade games we can think of that requires you to push up to jump (which everyone knows is madness). You can pick up the odd power-up however, including a rocket launcher and a devastating flamethrower, and the action is relentless.



YIE AR KUNG-FU 1985

KONAMI

Konami's one-on-one brawler helped establish the genre as we know it today, along with Irem's *Karate Champ*. It features energy bars, as well as progressively tougher opponents that must be dealt with before you face off against final adversary, Blues. It's also notable for featuring female combatants and a variety of different weapon-wielding opponents, which was unusual for the time. Like many of Konami's arcade games it was ported to home computers where it received a number of decent conversions. A sequel arrived the following year which added scrolling sections, but never received an arcade release.





SALAMANDER 1986

KONAMI

This *Gradius* spin-off is also known as *Life Force* and takes the series in interesting directions. Most versions replace the power bar for icons that instantly turn into weapons, and there's also a much-needed co-operative two-player mode. The game also alternates between horizontal and vertical scrolling stages. A sequel appeared in 1996.





WEC LE MANS 1986

KONAMI

Konami's game instantly stood out in arcades as the deluxe cabinet looked like a Prototype C Race car and could spin on a 360-degree spinning base. *WEC Le Mans* was the first game ever based on the popular sporting event, and featured both day and night racing. It received solid home conversions courtesy of Imagine Software.

CONTRA 1987

KONAMI

Konami's popular run-and-gun gleefully ripped off the likenesses of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger to deliver one of the most anarchic blasters of the Eighties. Levels alternate between reaching the enemy base and then infiltrating by running headlong into the screen. It released one more sequel in arcades (Super Contra) before continuing the franchise on consoles and handhelds.



BRIAN BEUKEN TALKS YIE AR KUNG-FU

How the Amstrad and Spectrum ports were made

How did your team get to work on the project?
We drove down to Manchester for a meeting with David Ward, and a short time later we got a call asking us if we could port *Yie Ar* to ZX Spectrum, Amstrad and C64. Of course we said yes.

Did you face any problems?
As production got underway the Amstrad and Speccy versions progressed really well, but the C64 was struggling due to the size of the graphics and the programmer's inability to get a decent multiplexer working. Then all the games had problems with memory, as we really couldn't fit everything in.

My Assembly coding had improved well enough to get involved, so I started working on compression-based sprite systems, which could decode on the fly, a form of early RLL compression. It worked well for Amstrad and I wrote similar systems for the Spectrum. The C64 version ground to a halt, and after discussion Ocean decided to take it in-house, and Dave Collier took it on.

Did you work on the improved Spectrum 128K version?
Later after we had done the project I was invited down to Ocean to do the Spectrum 128 version myself, which I was very excited to do. It meant leaving my little village in Scotland and moving to the big city to work, but it was such a massive opportunity I couldn't turn it down. I moved, and that really started my 30-year career as a professional game coder.



Had you had much experience with the game before?
Nope. Never heard of it before we started it.

What support did you receive from Konami?
None… I worked direct for Ocean/Imagine who basically gave me yes/no feedback. I rented the arcade game (I think Ocean agreed to pay for it), and played it to death. We were pretty much left to get on with it. You must remember this was pre-internet days, so we'd send a cassette down to them every few weeks to ensure we were on track, and as long as we were progressing towards the deadline they were happy. The only concern from them was the C64, which clearly was not working out, so the development manager at the time, Colin Stokes, came up to Scotland to assess the projects and made the decision to take the C64 version in-house, but he was happy with the other versions.

How did you manage to balance the difficulty between the different characters?
The AI was pretty simple and mostly worked on a ranging system with a random or timed choice with some clear offence and defence reaction moves. Different characters were biased towards ranged or melee attacks and their response speed was reduced to create difficulty. Back then we didn't have the luxury of memory or CPU power to do much more than that.



JAMES HIGGINS INTERVIEW

Coding Combat School for the Amstrad CPC

How did you come to work on *Combat School*?

I'd been doing some freelance projects for Ocean Software for the French home computer range by Thompson (M05, T07-70, T09) but had originally approached Gary Bracey as an Amstrad CPC programmer. He offered me the CS gig, but wanted me to work in the office in Manchester as a contractor still. I agreed readily as the bedroom-coder thing was getting a little old. So – I moved to Manchester and spent the next three months living in a B&B in Chorlton-cum-Hardy and working at 6 Central Street squeezed between Mike Lamb and Ronny Fowles.

Did you have access to the original source code?

No – we had an arcade machine from which a video was captured and used for reference. We could play the game any time we needed to clarify some details when needed. For the most part these were less arcade conversions and more arcade impressions.

Why wasn't the Amstrad version a straight Spectrum port?

Ocean actually did very few internal straight ports at that time. Almost all of the big titles of the day had individual coders – *Renegade* and *Gryzor* being two notable examples. Eventually coders caught on to the fact that they could get two bonuses for pretty much the exact same code and the z80 coders handled both platforms and occasionally others. MSX for example.

How long did *Combat School* take to create and how many of you worked on it?

I believe it took about 3 months. Me on the Amstrad with some help from Mike Lamb and Ronnie Fowles doing the art on both. Not sure if anyone helped him. It was a long time ago now.

What was the biggest technical challenge you faced while working on *Combat School*?

It was mostly about getting it done on time. Fortunately Mike Lamb was steaming ahead and helped out with the last couple of events or I might still be working on it. I'm not sure why I was moving slow – I was used to working fast. In all my previous titles I was responsible for organising the art – so perhaps working in a team for the first time was causing me some issues. Again, it was a long time ago now, so my memory is hazy.

How do you think your conversion compares to the other 8-bit versions of the time?

At the time I thought poorly. One, I needed help to finish it, and two – it was the first time I'd really seen what a C64 was capable of.

COMBAT SCHOOL 1987

KONAMI

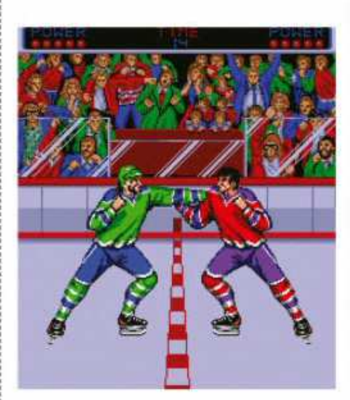
Best described as a military take on *Hyper Sports*, Konami's game actually comes in two versions: one with a trackball, and the other using a traditional joystick. Both games are the same, alternating between button-mashing events like the obstacle course and arm wrestling and then switching to precision-based shooting ranges. It culminates with a tough face-off against your Lee Emery-styled drill instructor.



BLADES OF STEEL 1987

KONAMI

If you're looking for an authentic reproduction of *Ice Hockey* you're going to be extremely disappointed. What you will find, however, is a hectic sports game with tight responsive controls, some challenging AI and the ability to take part in brawls. It didn't make much of an impact in the UK, which may explain why it had so few home conversions.





FAST LANE 1987

KONAMI

This fast-paced reaction game is effectively an update of Sega's 1979 game, *Head On*. The aim is to drive around a maze and eat up the asphalt and grass while avoiding a Bigfoot-styled truck which will immediately destroy you on impact as it makes its way towards you. Power-ups can be collected by running over rollerskating girls, which will allow you to stun, destroy or jump over the troublesome truck.

DEVASTATORS 1988

KONAMI

This ambitious run-and-gun took elements from *Cabal*, *Contra* and *Ikari Warriors* and combined them into an interesting shooter where you continually run forward into the screen mowing down waves of enemies. The stages range from airfields to jungles, and many of the bosses are very satisfying to take down. It's quite a technically accomplished game, which may explain the lack of home ports.





TEENAGE MUTANT NINJA TURTLES 1989

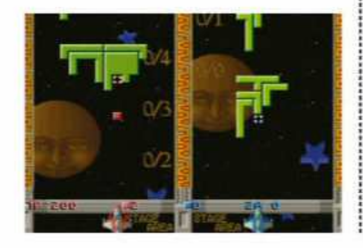
KONAMI

While always popular, scrolling fighters began to dominate the arcades in the late Eighties and early Nineties, and it largely became an arms race for supremacy between Capcom and Konami. Konami scored big with *Turtles* as it featured a recognisable licence, tremendous visuals and intense, four-player action. Its runaway success saw it ported to a large number of home systems, including the ZX Spectrum!

QUARTH 1989

KONAMI

This quirky puzzle shooter takes elements of *Tetris* but adds an inventive spin to proceedings. As different shapes fall from the sky you must shoot blocks at them to turn them into squares or rectangles, which will then disappear. It's a neat concept that's bolstered by an entertaining competitive two-player mode. It's known by the name *Block Hole* outside of Japan.





ALIENS 1990

KONAMI

It's not a very accurate portrayal of the movie, but *Aliens* proves to be a fantastic run-and-gun thanks to varied gameplay, exotic range of aliens (many of which are exclusive to the game) and excellent visuals. There's a great two-player option where you're joined by Hicks but, shockingly, it never received any home ports.

KONAMI'S PARODY OF ITS *GRADIUS* SERIES IS GLEEFULLY SILLY, SWAPPING OUT TRADITIONAL ENEMIES FOR PENGUINS





PARADIUS DA! 1990

KONAMI

Starting off life on the MSX, Konami's parody of its *Gradius* series is gleefully silly, swapping out traditional space enemies for penguins, flying cat ships and countless other bizarre foes. The outlandishness also extends to the game's bosses, which range from can-can dancers to sumo pigs. Like the MSX game it features a choice of characters, all of which feature their own unique weapon upgrade paths.





THE SIMPSONS 1991

KONAMI

While it's mechanically very similar to *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *The Simpsons* mixes things up a bit by including a team-up mechanic, which varies depending on which characters link up. All the characters fight with their own distinctive weapons, and virtually every member of Springfield makes a cameo, either as an adversary or as background fodder. Like *Turtles* it's a four-player game, although a smaller two-player cab also exists.

SUNSET RIDERS 1991

KONAMI

Konami's humorous take on the Western is still a tremendous amount of fun. It's a run-and-gun at heart that has you seeking out bounties on progressively tougher opponents. There are lots of hilarious sight gags (running into rakes, getting immolated by Molotov cocktails), while the bosses are constantly challenging without being unfair.





LETHAL ENFORCERS 1992

KONAMI

Konami's on-rails lightgun shooter drew controversy at the time for its use of realistic digitised graphics. Unlike many similar games it was largely set in real-world locations like banks and high streets, but it's otherwise a fairly conventional blaster. It was followed by a sequel in 1994 that was set in the American Old West.





X-MEN 1992

KONAMI



Here's another scrolling fighter that makes great use of its licence. Up to six players can play at once, and the playable characters include favourites such as Wolverine, Nightcrawler and Colossus. Based on the 1989 X-Men cartoon pilot, each hero has their own specific mutant power (which typically clears the screen of enemies) and features lots of classic bosses to battle.





DRAGOON MIGHT 1995

KONAMI

While it borrows heavily from the Samurai Shodown series, there are plenty of reasons to play this Japanese exclusive. There are some truly odd characters among the roster, including an ass-slapping man on bladed stilts, and it's possible to interact with the scenery and use it against your opponent on certain stages.



No engine, no team, no details from Disney and only a matter of months to make it, games™ discovers the impossibility of how Westwood turned The Lion King into one of the most beloved licensed games

PRESSURE CAN BE A FUNNY OLD THING. Few developers want to have to endure the trials that come from a corporate publisher or big-name license, but in doing so it can often lead to a greater product in the end. This pressure – as the old adage goes – ultimately leads to a diamond, and that's certainly one way of looking at *The Lion King*. What is widely considered to be one of the best platformers of the 16-bit generation, it has since gone on to be remembered as one of the best licensed games of all time. It is a combination of its different variables: close attention to Disney's license, assistance from its animation team, and the ambitious striving for perfection that Westwood Studios should be recognised for. But that quality was born from a great deal of pressure – a duress that was immediate.

"*Command & Conquer* was under development, but it wouldn't be released for another year and a half from the time that we started talking about *Lion King*," says Louis Castle, one of the co-founders of Westwood and the man who would ultimately become game director on the game. The developer itself was a part of Virgin Interactive, and had been since 1992, when in late 1993 Castle was approached by management at Virgin with the prospect of working on a new game.

"Of course, Virgin had just done *Aladdin*, and it had done a great job on *Cool Spot*, *Global Gladiators* and all these platformers," recalls Castle. Virgin was hoping to capitalise on the reputation it had built for great platformers, but there was only so much it could do in-house; it was calling on other developers to help.

"The plan that was presented to us in October was that we would have a small group of people in Las Vegas [at Westwood] that would use the tools and know-how of the team in Irvine [at Virgin Interactive] to help ramp us up, and that we would be sort of sharing resources so we wouldn't have to try and build a bunch of stuff ourselves."

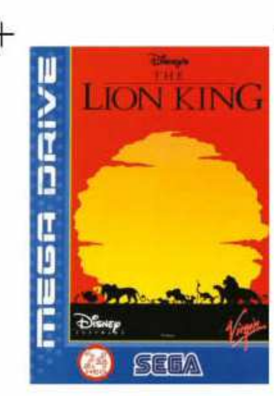
Castle was reluctant, and not because it would require working with Disney, who Westwood had already worked with and had a great relationship with. "They [work to] very high standards as a company," says Castle, "and I knew that going in, but in the end of the day I just didn't want take on a project where I wouldn't have complete control. There were all these assurances that it was going to be fine and that we would have all these tools, which was great, except that things happen…"

Virgin wasn't about to give up, however. It knew Westwood was a stickler for quality, and had the capabilities to take on a project that was being seen internally at Disney as its next big thing. All the animation studio's efforts were going into creating a benchmark film, which – as Castle highlights – wasn't necessary a surefire success when it came to Disney animal films. "You have to put yourself back in that context. Now, of course, people would fall over themselves, but back then it was quite risky – Disney hadn't had a very good record with animal movies at that point."

To convince Castle and his team to work on the game, they brought Castle to Burbank Studios where Disney was making the film, and they showed him the first five minutes, which he says caused him to be "moved to tears".

"So with all these assurances from Dave Perry and his team, we said, 'Sure, we'll throw our hat in the ring', and I know that it helped that Westwood was going to get involved, because we had a good reputation."

Good intentions are rarely enough in the games industry, however; even the best laid plans often go awry. Almost as soon as Castle was convinced that Westwood should be involved with *The Lion King*, Virgin's star platform game developer, Dave Perry, and his team left the company to form Shiny, and with it any hope of assistance on the next big Disney game from Virgin in-house. "I love Dave and Mike, all those guys are fantastic talents," says

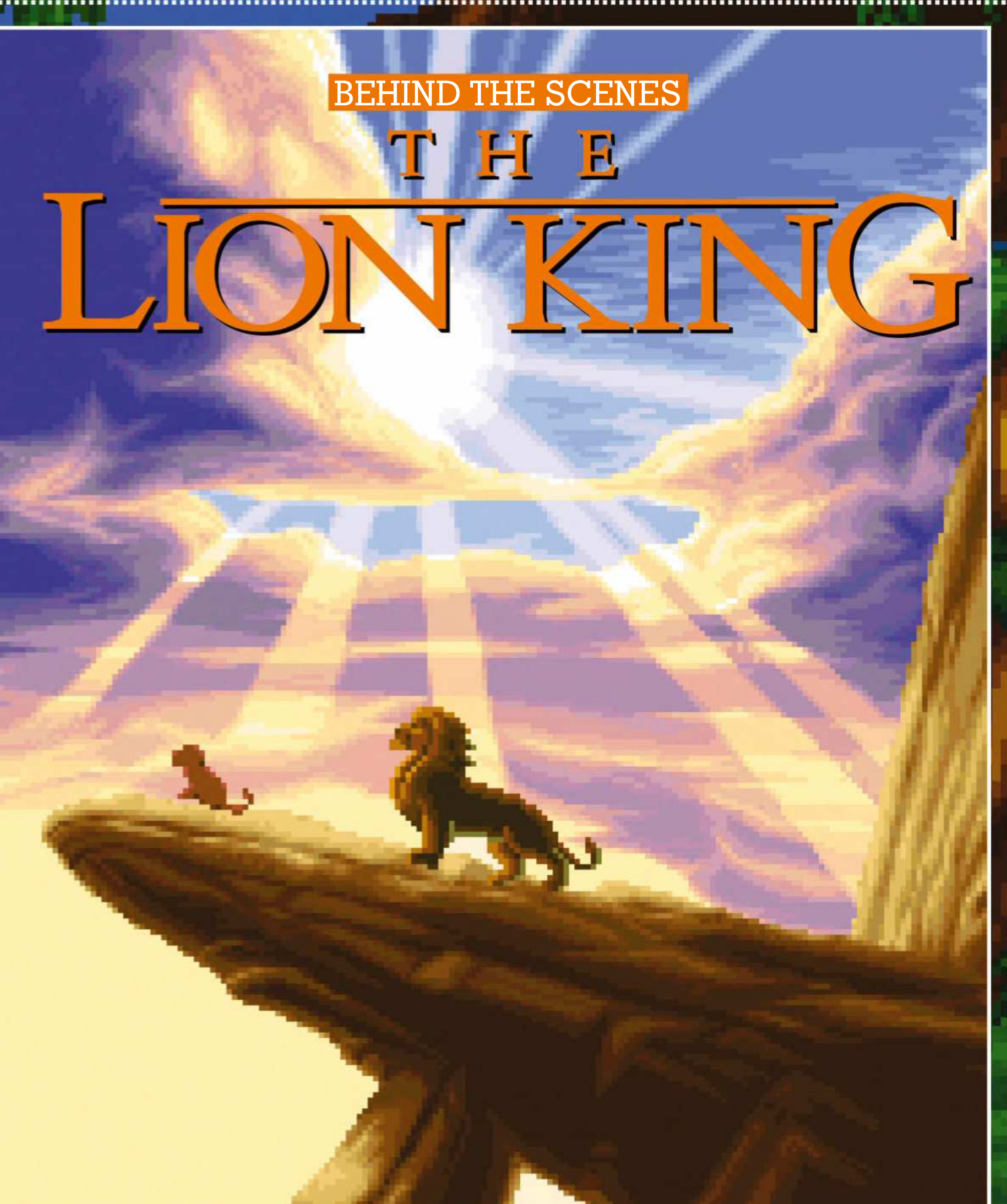


Released: 1994
Format: Mega Drive, PC, SNES
Publisher: Virgin Interactive
Key Staff: Louis Castle (game director), Seth Mendelsohn (lead designer), Barry Green (SNES programmer), Rob Povey (Mega Drive programming), Erik Yeo (assistant designer)

> I JUST DIDN'T WANT TAKE ON A PROJECT WHERE I WOULDN'T HAVE COMPLETE CONTROL



The 'I Just Can't Wait To Be King' level was infamous as much for its fantastic recreation of the film's fun song as the insane difficulty of its puzzle.


BEHIND THE SCENES
THE LION KING

WHAT THEY SAID…

Fantastic! The colours and graphics are incredibly colourful and clean. The control is absolutely flawless, which makes the game so much fun to play. The Lion King is challenging enough for the older gamer and still fun for the kiddie in you



Electronic Gaming Monthly, 1994

Castle of the moment the news dropped, "but the reality is that when the team leaves and nobody knows how to use the tools, those tools are pretty much worthless."

This left Westwood with a limited team, a need to create an entire engine from scratch, the prospect of help from platforming experts now in the bin, and only a matter of months – just over half a year – to get it all done. To make matters worse, there was very little information from Disney on the film, and so the team had no more than the memory of the first five minutes of the film stored within Castle's head to work with. "It wasn't even a couple of months in that it became very apparent that we just couldn't get any of the documents or anything from Disney," recalls Castle.

With nothing to do about it, the only option was to put together a team able to face the challenge head on; Westwood's "best, brightest and most talented", who also had an interest in working on a Disney license. "We also brought Seth [Mendelsohn] and Eric [Yeo] over from Irvine and put them up in an apartment so they were close to the offices, because they were the real experts in platform games."

With the team assembled and geared for a few months of hell, Westwood got to work. Disney and Virgin wanted a platformer, so the developer looked to the likes of *Aladdin* to find out what worked, picking out the best parts, ditching the worst and combining it all in a manner that would fit the film. "My process for doing any kind of license property is always, before we even pitch for a product – and this goes way back before Westwood – we would sit down and imagine for ourselves what it is about the game and the property that people will talk about for years to come."

WE HAD ALL THESE TECHNICAL CHALLENGES THAT WE DIDN'T HAVE ANY IDEA HOW TO SOLVE

Westwood was always ambitious, and *The Lion King* was going to require that enthusiasm. Even if it still had assistance from Virgin Interactive, to develop a game alongside a film while it was in production would be a challenge. There was only one way to tackle the situation. "We decided what we were going to do was to recreate all these great scenes – we did know about the wildebeest scene, so that was going to be fantastic. We had all these technical challenges we didn't have any idea how to solve, but the bottom line was we felt like we just had to make something that was going to be respectful of the film and the journey that the viewer takes during the film and the player takes with the game, in growing up as Simba into an adult lion."

This led to the standout element of the project: a game of two halves in some means. "We started off with the little bouncy cub jumping on enemies' heads," explains Castle, "very Mario-esque style and very similar to the other platformer games that had been done at Virgin to date, because we knew that format worked really well." The idea was to change the game in line with the progression of the story; in much the same way that Simba was on a journey of growth, the game would grow the abilities of the character. The result was a change not only in the visual look of Simba, but how he played. "When you became that adult lion we wanted to bring in some very light brawling moves, group tackle and stuff like that. So we knew vaguely what we were going to do, but it took quite a bit of prototyping to get it to work."



There was a good deal of variety to each of the different stages, though the platforming mechanics were awkward.



Once Simba became an adult, the gameplay added in combat, and it felt like a very different game as a result.



■ All the key moments of the film were encapsulated well into the stages, often interspersed with animations or set pieces.

Finding that perfect balance to the gameplay naturally took a lot of tweaking through playtesting – tests that mostly utilised basic stick figures to get the right feel of the movement and combat – which wasn't without its difficulties when dealing with Disney. "We had worked on Goofy, Mickey and Donald games in the past," says Castle. "We had already dealt with Disney and their precious property, so it wasn't like we didn't know what we were getting into."

Yet while this did bring added difficulty and pressure, the benefits were obvious since the deal also enlisted the use of Disney's animation studio in Florida. "Who wouldn't?" says Castle of the opportunity to make use of the powerhouse studio, though he admits this did "cause all sorts of issues in the early days, and took quite a bit of political will to redirect."

The process was an arduous one, requiring Westwood to work with those scrappy stick figures, periodically sending Disney its own recreations of the film's characters, who would then redo them wholesale.



THE CONSOLE WAR

IT WAS THE ARGUMENT OF ITS TIME, BUT HOW DID THE LION KING FARE IN THE BATTLE?

BACKGROUNDS





When it came to in-game backgrounds, there was quite a good bit of distinction between the two versions. The stronger colour contrast of the Mega Drive (right) meant that there was a better clarity between the darkest parts and the colours were a little brighter, but often it was too dark to make out the details of some stages. The SNES (left) had more pixels in its backgrounds, however, which meant that certain levels had much greater detail and were softer in appearance as a result.

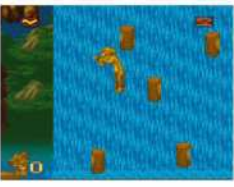
SPRITES





Whether it was the animation or the detail of the game's characters, this is an area where the two were practically the same – likely a result of Disney's demanding expectations and Westwood's determination and knowledge. The more muted tones of the SNES colour palette often meant that it was considered to be the better of the two, but objectively there wasn't much on a technical level that could separate the two.

GAMEPLAY





The speed of the Mega Drive wasn't much of an advantage here since, as a platformer, *The Lion King* was a little more slow-paced and favoured more methodical jumps. One element that wasn't commonly considered was the SNES's wider ratio, which helped a lot in this game since it relied more on horizontal platforming rather than vertical. This meant there was a wider view of your jumps on the SNES, and a taller (and therefore largely unused) view on the Mega Drive.

WILDEBEEST CHASE





Since the SNES had its Mode 7 function, developing the into-the-camera chase scene was a little easier (though it was, naturally, still a challenge) for Nintendo's console. The result, therefore, meant subtle improvements to the SNES version, both visually and on a gameplay level. One subtle difference was that the SNES added a slight shake to the screen as the wildebeest charged past Simba. This managed to add quite a lot to the experience, even if it was an ever-so-slight improvement over Sega's console.

SOUND

This is one area where the SNES really outperformed over the Mega Drive. There were fewer of the original tracks from the film recreated in the latter, and those that were just sounded better on the SNES. That's not to say that both weren't great, of course, but SNES easily edged it in front here.

MONKEY BUSINESS

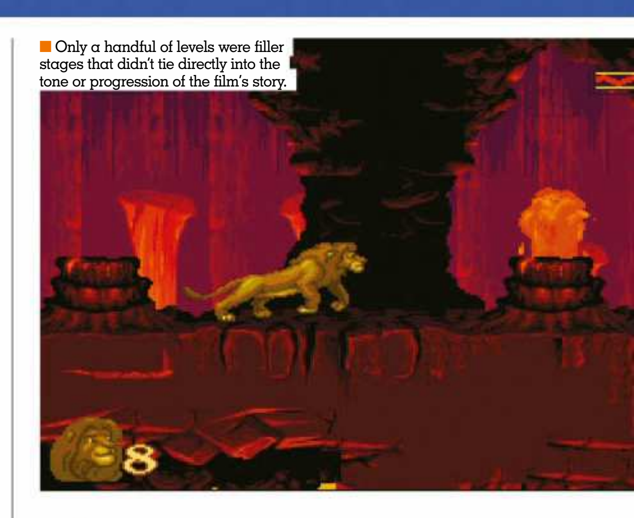
How the infamously difficult monkey puzzle was made so hard…

"THE OVERALL DIFFICULTY of the game was absolutely deliberate by our game team, but it was an oscillation difficulty. My game design sensibilities as a creative director is to increase and release pressure on the player, both in terms of skills required and cognitive load. But Disney, in the 11th hour, had a research group – it was a brand new group – with a misguided mission that said you couldn't finish some percentage of the game within the first hour because this research group had shown that people would rent instead of buy, and so the only thing that we could do was take level two and make the monkey puzzle much, much longer and harder. It really wasn't meant to be that hard. And so that was key place where Disney's agenda negatively affected the game."





There were a number of ports – such as for the well-received Game Gear seen here – and though they weren't handled by Westwood, leveraged the same gameplay and stage progression.



Only a handful of levels were filler stages that didn't tie directly into the tone or progression of the film's story.

These new animations were then sent back to Westwood, who digitised them, removed the watermarks and created something as close to these creations as was possible on the 16-bit hardware. Before long it became clear that this drawn-out process simply wasn't going to work, least of all if the team was to reach the deadline in time for an October release.

By March 1994, Castle and much of *The Lion King* team flew out to Florida and resumed work at Disney's studios, sitting alongside the animators of the film. This closer connection to the film studio smoothed out many of the delays, but it still wasn't without its challenges, primary among them being the clash between game developers and Disney animation artists. "We got feedback from the animators all the time," recalls Castle. "They would come in and they would watch it, and we would have a very spirited debate. They would say, 'It's popping! It's popping!' and we would say, 'Yeah, we know it's popping, but just sit down and give us a chance, just play it'."

The film's animators wouldn't have the understanding of the hardware limitations, of what was possible and the concessions that were made to help them realise that Westwood wasn't working against them. "We would have it on a toggle, you wouldn't normally have to have a toggle where you would run a bunch of extra frames of animation that you know are not necessary; you would just cut them. But because we had to have buy-in from the animators and they had to understand how their work was being interpreted, we had to do things like that. It meant extra work for the programmers, for sure, but we got great insights from people who didn't play videogames."

And it wasn't just on an artistic level, either. The animators didn't speak the language of gaming, didn't understand the common parlance that all gamers – even then – were able to comprehend. "This one guy I remember having a huge argument about the fact that it was just physically impossible for something that has just launched itself into the air to change direction mid-air," laughs Castle. "It just didn't make any sense to him." There was a sense of having to teach those working on the film about what it meant to adapt their work into a game, to sit them down and show them how these necessary elements worked – or more to the point, how the game wouldn't with the alternative.

"We had to show them how it would feel otherwise, and at first they would go, 'It's fine!' and then they'd play

the game for a little bit and they'd say, 'Oh, yeah, it's really frustrating!' I would say the biggest pushbacks we had were from the restraints of the machine at the time were challenging. We just didn't have that many frames to run, so we were often trying to pull out a bunch of frames or not use a key frame because it didn't happen in the right spot in the state machine, the sort of technical details that were tough for them to understand."

But the area where the hardware really fought against the grand aspirations of Westwood was the wildebeast scene, famous as much in the film as it is in the game. The team knew about this moment early on in the game's development, and that gave them the opportunity to formulate some ideas about how it should be presented, the end result being the novel into-the-camera chase scene. "We were writing most of our stuff in really optimised assembly language," says Castle, "so we were able to push some boundaries in some of the stuff that most people wouldn't be able to do. And I think the wildebeest scene was a great example of that."

It was such a technical challenge that both Virgin's producer and Disney's technical director were doubtful that it could work out, so much so that the latter was intending to scrap what would go on to be a standout, defining moment of the game. "We went to go do our check-in early in the days, and we had found out in advance that the technical director was skeptical about the idea, and was going to go in there and basically want to talk us out of it," explains Castle.

Westwood wasn't to be deterred, though, and so it "crammed for several days" to get the mode working, albeit with only black and white scans of the animations. "And so we went into the meeting and we said, 'Well, we've really got some things to show you', and the technical director said, 'Yeah, before you show that, why don't you set up the demo, but we'd really like to talk to you about some concerns we have over the design.' And as we're setting up the demo, this poor tech director launches into all the reasons why it's going to be extremely challenging, extremely hard, it's probably going to take too long and we're never going to make our deadline. Meanwhile, the thing he says that can't be done is popping up on the screen. It was never intended to be so brutal, but it was like… oh, dude! He turns to look at the screen and – I still remember – he closes his little binder and says, 'Well, I guess I won't have to worry about that part'."

HOW CLOSE CAN WE GET TO THE SPIRIT OF THE FILM? HOW CAN WE RECREATE THOSE EMOTIONS?

But then that was just the kind of developer Westwood was. Castle may well call it ambitious, but others might say 'foolhardy', 'bull-headed' or even 'brave'. At every point of *The Lion King*'s development there was pressure from one direction or another, be it fighting with the hardware, Disney's artists or even the potential threat of the film itself turning out to be an utter flop. By the time it was done, the team were shattered, and all that hard work was really under question. "We got this thing done," says Castle, "But we were asking ourselves: is it really any good? Are we just going to get destroyed this Christmas with everybody hating the game?" But that didn't happen. It was a huge success, and though some critics found the difficulty to be a little unbearable, it was impossible to consider it to be anything other than a huge success.

"It was one of Westwood's most successful titles," says Castle. "I think it might have been our single most successful title on multiple platforms." But financial success is one thing; few games can claim a spot in a hall of fame like *The Lion King*. As we've mentioned, not only would it go on to be considered one of the greatest platformers of the generation, to this day it is one of the examples many point to when demonstrating how a licensed game should work – and more than two decades on that's quite a testament to Westwood's sheer willpower to make the most of a license.

"We had a real philosophy that we were going to make a game that was true to the license, and that if you think about the game then it added value to the intellectual property; it didn't borrow from it. So as much as we were aware of our competition to make sure that our play was competitive, I was the game director, and I wasn't really looking at other people's games to worry about it. I was just saying, 'How close can we get to the spirit of the film? How can I recreate those emotions that I felt when Simba is on the Pridelands? When he's doing 'I Just Can't Wait To Be King'? When he's in the Elephant Graveyard? I mean, that's what we were trying to do."

WHAT THEY SAID…

Oh, boy, did we want to give this a perfect score – but we just couldn't. Despite some of the best sound and graphics we've seen this year and lots of challenge, Lion King's game play just isn't on a par in pace and consistency with past classics like Aladdin and Jungle Book.

GamePro, 1994



> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Aladdin > The Lion King > Toy Story



Aladdin had been developed by two developers for either console, but *The Lion King* was done simultaneously on both.





The visuals on *Toy Story* were a big step-up, using almost-3D graphics to replicate the film's exciting visuals.

Resident Evil 4 had you rushing into the unknown as Resident Evil 2 star Leon S. Kennedy, on a mission to rescue the US President's daughter from a mysterious cult

GAME CHANGERS

RESIDENT EVIL 4

Developer: Capcom Production Studio 4 **Publisher:** Capcom **Released:** 11 January 2005 **System:** GameCube

It should never have worked, but Resident Evil's grand reimagining beat all of the odds and established itself as one of the greatest third-person action games of all time



IT'S FUNNY TO look back on it all now. There was a period of time, not all that long ago, where it looked as if *Resident Evil 4* would be the death of a series, rather than the total reinvention of it. Little more than a footnote in the evolution of the third-person action genre, rather than one of its most integral components – a touchstone of inspired design that is still referenced to this day, over a decade and two console generations later.

You need to remember that by the time September 2003 rolled around, Capcom's biggest franchise was in serious trouble. The publisher had been funding the creation of *Resident Evil 4* since late 1999, and had nothing tangible to show for it, or the millions it had invested into incubation and development. By September 2003, Capcom was growing increasingly frustrated by the small team out of Production Studio 4's strained attempts to breathe fresh life into the rotting corpse of survival horror, a genre it had once so famously pioneered.

IN MANY WAYS, UNDERSTANDING THE HISTORY BEHIND RESIDENT EVIL 4'S TUMULTUOUS DEVELOPMENT IS IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTANDING AND TRULY APPRECIATING ITS SUCCESS

Game director Hideki Kamiya had taken the first run at the reinvention of Resident Evil at the behest of series creator Shinji Mikami, stumbling upon the concept, mechanics and systems that would later mutate into *Devil May Cry*. Development subsequently started over in 2001, and again, in early 2003, two non-starters guided by Hiroshi Shibata – both refined enough to be shown to the public, gameplay of the famed 'Fog' and 'Hook Man' demonstrations can still be found online – but

CONSISTENCY IS KEY

ELEMENTS THAT HELPED TIE RESIDENT EVIL 4 BACK TO ITS ROOTS



RIDICULOUS BOSS BATTLES

★ Resident Evil games have always had larger-than-life boss battles thanks to the various viruses unleashed by Umbrella. But with that particular avenue closed for Capcom, it had to rely on over-the-top QTE-driven scenarios, ridiculous creatures and a whole host of mind-boggling battles.



MICRO-MANAGEMENT

★ *Resident Evil 4* might have ditched most of the retro stylings of the series in this instalment, but it wasn't about to get rid of its most popular frustration. The game could only be saved at typewriters that were littered across the world without explanation, and item management still had you re-organising suitcases.



STUPID PUZZLES

★ There is no way out of this room. But oh! Look, what's this we see?! Well now, that's a platinum sword mounted on a gold plaque, and that there is a gold sword mounted on a platinum plaque… what ever should happen were I to switch these two aro – oh my! A hidden door! Resident Evil, you've done it again.

were later scrapped. A fourth version even entered pre-production, but would be gutted soon after as the studio grappled with the critical response to *Resident Evil: Code Veronica*, the 2002 remake and *Resident Evil: Zero*, which had all subsequently arrived in the time between the game's various non-starts. By September 2003, Mikami reluctantly reasserted his control and influence over *Resident Evil 4*. He sought to fight back against claims – both internally and externally – that the series had become creatively bankrupt, resting on its laurels in failing to expand beyond the premise and restraints that the earliest Resident Evil games had once so famously established. Against all odds then, Mikami and his talented and long-suffering team were able to deliver one of the finest third-person action games ever created. *Resident Evil 4* is a marvel, a true testament to the power of risk taking and reinvention in the field of interactive entertainment.

In many ways, understanding the history behind *Resident Evil 4*'s tumultuous development is important to understanding and truly appreciating its success. Making games isn't easy, nor is it cheap. You have to imagine that such drastic changes to the core framework of the series were made possible, in part at least, by a publisher that was merely content with finally seeing a product go gold. The dank, claustrophobic retrograde interiors of old were out, replaced with a sprawling Spanish village and adjacent castle facilities. The fixed camera was replaced by a third-person camera that stuck closely to the shoulder, giving you a wider perspective on play while opening up the opportunity for more dynamic and action-oriented interaction. Free-aim was introduced to let returning agent Leon S. Kennedy focus fire on specific body parts of any member of the Los Illuminados – the otherworldly cultists that would controversially replace the shambling zombies in this instalment – that dared approach him. And approach him they did, relentlessly and in large numbers too.

KEY FACTS

■ *Resident Evil 4* was supposed to be one of three GameCube exclusive Resident Evil titles, joining a remake of the original and the prequel *Resident Evil: Zero*. It would later be ported to just about every console on the planet.

■ This is the final Resident Evil game to feature the input and creative overview of series creator Shinji Mikami. The creative director departed the company and linked up with his former colleagues Atsushi Inaba and Hideki Kamiya at Clover Studios, going on to develop the legendary *God Hand*.

The surmounting dread and jump scares that the series founded its reputation on were out the door, replaced instead by a more cerebral form of terror – one that preyed directly on our inherent fight-or-flight instincts. *Resident Evil 4* fostered tension and horror by throwing groups of smart, capable assailants at you, looking to overwhelm the player and force them into making mistakes as the ever-surmounting stress of frantic crowd-control began to cloud judgement and empty the ammo reserves.

Sure, its dialogue was as schlocky as ever, and its puzzle design a little redundant, and far more troubling to this day is some of its commentary on, and the treatment of, the female characters that appear throughout the lengthy adventure in a variety of roles. But *Resident Evil 4* looked to distract from these contentious elements with some truly incredible set-piece execution, sublime overarching systems, and exquisite mechanical combat design.

Resident Evil 4 rooted its players in its world in a way that precious few games could ever claim to. To an extent, that is literally true; the combat may look fast-paced and action oriented, but it still required Leon to plant his feet firmly to the ground in order to fire his weapon. The world is constantly moving around you; groups of fast-moving enemies swarm from all angles, and the distant roar of a chainsaw revving into action an assault on the senses. All you can do is stand there and shoot, desperately hoping to hold the crowd at bay for a few seconds longer. Or you could run, of course, but the labyrinthine levels offered precious few areas to catch your breath. That is, of course, the brilliance of *Resident Evil 4*; it's an action game that never gives you the opportunity to think or feel, it pushes you into a state of blind panic as the world around you consumes all available screen space, overwhelming and, if you aren't careful, enveloping you entirely. *Resident Evil 4* set a new standard for the third-person shooter that precious few have been able to match since.

GAME CHANGERS

TEN SERIES THAT REINVENTED THEMSELVES

REBOOTS ARE A RISKY THING, BUT THESE RELEASES NAILED IT



FALLOUT

Following ten years of inactivity, the legendary Fallout game series stumbled out of the vault of Interplay Entertainment refreshed, renewed and into the arms of Bethesda. The studio, most famously known for its work on The Elder Scrolls series, quickly set out to reinvent the 2D isometric RPG by transitioning its framework into a fully 3D, open-world space, driven by action-combat and a first-person perspective. It's one of the best, and most controversial, series reinventions of all time.



METROID

It had been eight long years since Samus had last been seen in a solo adventure, and fans were eager for a follow-up to *Super Metroid*. The last thing they had expected to see was a first-person action-adventure game handled by a western outfit, Retro Studios. Of course, as we now know, it couldn't have turned out any better. *Metroid Prime* isn't just one of the best GameCube games; it's one of the best games, *period*.



SUPER MARIO

Nintendo established the framework for the pixel-perfect 2D platformer with *Super Mario Bros*, and against all odds, it did it once again as technology had progressed far enough to give us 3D spaces to explore and enjoy. *Super Mario 64*'s release in 1996 was a landmark moment for the industry; a colossal reinvention of a classic franchise and a defining point in time for one of gaming's most celebrated genres.



CASTLEVANIA

The Castlevania games had always been fantastic non-linear exploration experiences, but *Symphony Of The Night* pushed the series to a pinnacle it would never again reach. Of course, something had to change. MercurySteam worked with Konami to release 2010's *Castlevania: Lords Of Shadow*, a reboot featuring beautiful Gothic exteriors and solid 3D action. It wasn't for everybody, but was certainly a nice change of pace.



DONKEY KONG

For many years Donkey Kong had been a lowly Mario villain and occasional kart racer despite having a legendary arcade game named after him. Then Rare stepped in, giving ol' DK the opportunity to reclaim his star power, leaving the construction sites behind in favour of exploring a tropical island in 1994's *Donkey Kong Country*. It was, of course, a success – the Country series still continues on to this day.



WARCRAFT

It's easy to forget, but Warcraft wasn't always synonymous with massively multiplayer online action and wasting away hours farming gold. No, it used to be a pioneering real-time strategy game. Of course, *World Of Warcraft*'s launch in 2004 would become a cultural phenomenon the likes of which we've never seen, a MMORPG that continues to stand the test of time and defy expectations at every turn.



GRAND THEFT AUTO

We wonder, did DMA Design ever truly understand what it was about to unleash upon the world in 2001? The release of *Grand Theft Auto III* was an important milestone in the history of the games industry, and an incredible step forward for the design of open-world games and the technology that makes them possible. GTA's reinvention from what was effectively a top-down score attack to a cinematic, character-driven, systems-driven action game is simply outstanding.



METAL GEAR

It would take Konami (and series creator Hideo Kojima) almost a decade of waiting before the technology arrived that made it possible for the Metal Gear dream to come to life. From its humble origins as an early progenitor of the stealth genre in 1987 to the total reinvention and epitome of it in 1998 with *Metal Gear Solid*, this is one of the finest examples of why it's wise for franchises to move forward with the times and tech.



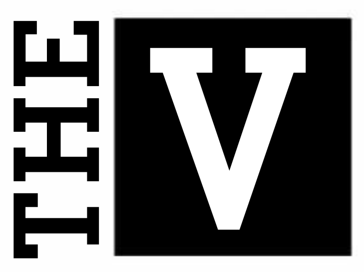
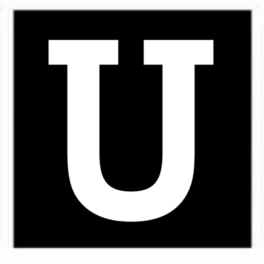
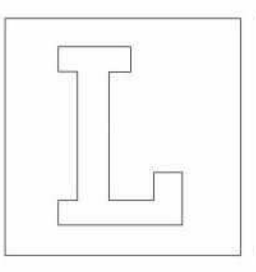
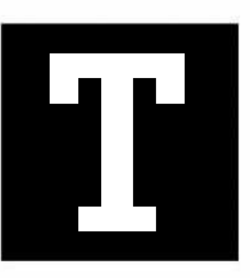
RESIDENT EVIL

Of all of the franchises on this list, Resident Evil is perhaps the most competent at reinventing itself. Capcom has successfully rebooted the survival horror series twice in a hugely successful fashion; first with third-person action game *Resident Evil 4* in 2005, and then again in 2017 with the release of first-person *Resident Evil VII*. This isn't a series that is willing to die; instead, it continues to mutate, and be all the better because of it.



PREY

We still aren't sure why Bethesda decided to stick with the Prey branding when it allowed Arkane Studios to pursue an immersive sim set out in the stars. The original *Prey* was a sort of weird and wonderful FPS game that played with time dilation and physics in some smart (well, smart for 2006, at any rate) ways, whereas this reboot was an ambitious first-person RPG. Don't get us wrong, both are great in their own ways, it's just curious is all.

THE     

LOGITECH PRO GAMING HEADSET

MANUFACTURER: **LOGITECH** PRICE: **£84.99**

Logitech's Pro series has just had another member of the family added, with this excellent new headset now sitting alongside its mouse and keyboard offering. So far these Pro devices, built with input from esports professionals, have been sleek, simple and highly compact designs, and this gaming headset is no different in this regard.

First of all, if you know anything about our taste in headphones then you'll have guessed that we love the simplicity and understated nature of these. No flashy lights and a clean matte black finish make them nicely understated. All of the effort in the design, therefore, has been pushed into build quality and comfort, both of which score highly for us. The plastic frame is solid, the headband cushioning firm, and the overall feel very good. It may be a little heavy on the ear-cup pressure around your head, but it's still comfortable enough for extended play sessions, and you have an alternate set of ear-cups in the box too if you care to swap them out.

In terms of sound performance these headphones also do very well, again focusing in on what's important (in-game sound quality) over what isn't (day-to-day use). So the bass comes in hot and heavy with the Pro Gaming Headset, giving you a fantastic action soundscape in games like *Fortnite* or *PUBG*, where being able to hear every bullet is so important. That low end and bass are very well tuned, but that's at the expense of the high end, which makes the experience of listening to music a little more mixed. Still, not terrible; just not the very best.

All that being said, for the price you're getting excellent design, a fit for purpose approach to audio quality, and great comfort and that seems like all the most important things you could ask for. It's a top-end headset, if not the very best out there.

www.logitechg.com

VERDICT 8/10

The build quality of the Pro Headset is excellent with fantastic comfort as well as a firm grip on your head. It may feel a little too firm for some. Shouldn't bee too much trouble though.

The Pro Headset's mic can be easily removed, as it's on a 35mm plug. It picks up sound great though, so it's really ideal for all your in-game chat needs.

GAMING CLOTHING



ZELDA ESSENTIALS

Available in a variety of colours and t-shirt styles, from slim fit to long sleeve and 'relaxed scoop', we really like this homage to the Zelda series and its wide array of tools and toys. Truly these are your dungeon-exploring essentials.
www.designbyhumans.com



ROLLING

Part of an excellent range of new Insert Coin Katamari tees you can find now, this little number really tells you the whole story as the prince looks to roll up some small items and work his way up to what looks like a postbox. Nice.
www.insertcoinclothing.com



CUPHEAD YOU DIED T-SHIRT

An excellent pick for a *Cuphead* design, the most-seen image of anyone's experience playing the game is your ghost floating away as you lose your last life. It's all the more punishing when it happens to both players at once.
www.thinkgeek.com

GAMING LAPTOPS

ASUS ROG STRIX GL502VS-DS71

PRICE: **$1,699**

With some help from our friends on *PC Gamer*, we have some top gaming laptop tips for you this issue, and among the very best is the Republic Of Gamers number for Asus. It's a great example of how significant power can be housed in a unit that's not too large. It features a 15-inch screen, isn't too bulky or heavy, and doesn't come with a price point that's too eye-popping. One of the highlights is the screen, as it offers 1080p images (pretty standard), but with a 120Hz refresh rate (not so standard), which means you shouldn't get any screen tearing when playing full resolution with the frame rate set to high.
store.asus.com



ACER PREDATOR HELIOS 300

PRICE: **$1,099.99**

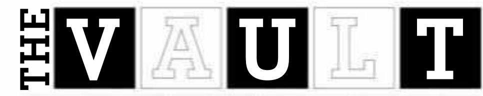
Sitting just below the £1,000 point from most retailers, this Helios 300 is considered to be a really solid budget performer while still offering a GTX 1060 GPU, which means it will support 1080p graphics at 60fps without too much trouble. Other budget laptops can definitely be found for a lot less money, but few can promise this level of graphics performance. The battery life on this laptop is also excellent, thanks in part to the way it jumps between the graphics card and integrated graphics for non-gaming activities, helping to reduce power consumption. Its form factor is pretty strong, although a tad heavier than some options you might see around.
www.acer.com

GIGABYTE AERO 15X-BK4

PRICE: **$1,495.24**

If portability is everything for you – and it's probably a big factor if you're looking for a gaming laptop to supplement your home rig – then a Max-Q laptop that offers a thinner design is what you'll be after. This Gigabyte Aero is about the same width as a MacBook Pro, making it incredibly compact for the performance it gives you. It doesn't quite offer the refresh rate performance you might find elsewhere, but with a minimal bezel on the screen and a crispness to the display, you'll still get incredible images. And despite so much being packed into such a small frame, you're getting excellent battery performance from this laptop too.
www.ebuyer.com







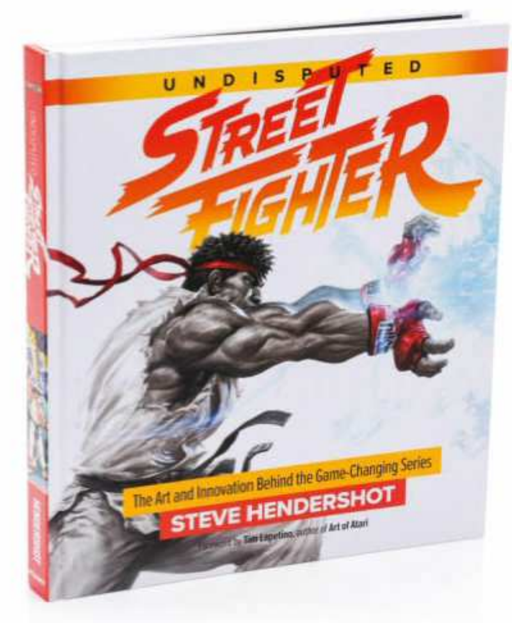






UNDISPUTED STREET FIGHTER: A 30TH ANNIVERSARY RETROSPECTIVE

PUBLISHER: **DYNAMITE ENTERTAINMENT**



When we're looking at a game-related book, especially one that is a celebration of a series or console, we're looking for three key things: quality images, great design and access. Steve Hendershot and Dynamite Entertainment have nailed it on all three counts, and that's why this is not only an essential purchase for fans of the series, but also a book any fans of gaming in general should cast their eye over.

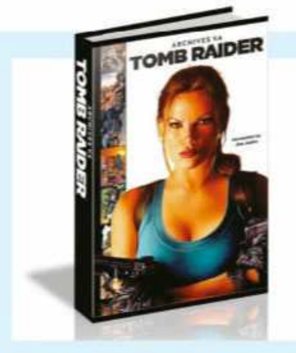
Structurally, we have to say it's very good indeed. It handles the series chronologically, from the original *Street Fighter* arcade cabinets all the way up to *Street Fighter V*, but it dips in and out of other important touchstones too, like *Final Fight* and the rise of arcade celebrities (later to be overtaken by pro players).

Design wise, it makes good use of its large format and excellent paper quality to deliver the best canvas for Street Fighter's varied artwork to stand out, features plenty of photographs from the different eras it covers (all in excellent quality too), and the pixels are delivered as crisp as you could want, really showing off the game's 16-bit glory all the way to the HD era.

For access, you have designers, producers, historians, players and artists all chipping in with comments and memories. The package feels comprehensive, but not laboured. It moves along from topic to topic at a cracking pace, best exemplified by the character-by-character profiles towards the end, nicely broken up by curious side stories like the world's largest Street Fighter collection and the designer who makes custom Street Fighter LEGO minifigs. From cover to cover, it's a truly excellent tribute to Capcom's legendary fighting series.

www.dynamite.com

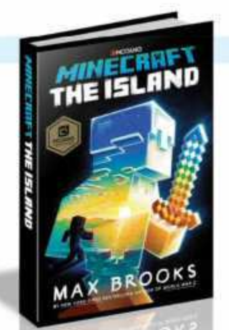




TOMB RAIDER ARCHIVES VOLUME 4

As the title suggests, this is a collection of story arcs from Lara's long-running comic incarnation dating back to 1999. This fourth release offers the original issue 0 and 1/2, then jumps forward to the *Tomb Raider: Journeys* run and a selection of one-shots. Not a bad place to jump in, with nearly 500 pages of story to get into.

www.darkhorse.com



A HISTORY OF VIDEOGAMES

We rather like the format of this look back over the history the gaming industry, as it focuses in on objects, whether consoles, special edition releases of games or other paraphernalia, as a gateway to exploring the trends of the time. Nicely designed and well put together, it's a very different take on the industry than you might find elsewhere.

www.amazon.co.uk

MINECRAFT: THE ISLAND

While there are a bunch of stories based in the *Minecraft* world (or something very close to it), this is actually the first official novel release for the franchise. What's more, Mojang managed to secure the services of *World War Z* author Max Brooks to lend some drama and authenticity this tale of survival and adventure. Should be interesting.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



Future PLC Richmond House, 33 Richmond Hill, Bournemouth, Dorset, BH2 6EZ

Editorial
Editor **Jonathan Gordon**
jonathan.gordon@futurenet.com
01202 586213
Deputy Editor **Josh West**
Art Editor **Andy Salter**
Photographer **James Sheppard**
Group Editor in Chief **Tony Mott**
Senior Art Editor **Warren Brown**

Contributors
Adam Barnes, Vikki Blake, Emma Boyle, Ian Dransfield, Sam Greer, Darran Jones, Alysia Judge, Katie Nicholls, John Robertson, Nikole Robinson, Brittany Vincent, Paul Walker-Emig, Steve Wright

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Advertising
Media packs are available on request
Commercial Director **Clare Dove**
clare.dove@futurenet.com
Account Director **Kevin Stoddart**
kevin.stoddart@futurenet.com
01888 888888

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Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief financial officer **Penny Ladkin-Brand**

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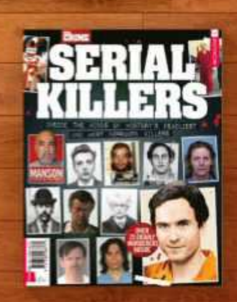


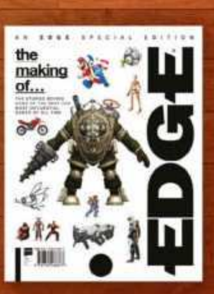
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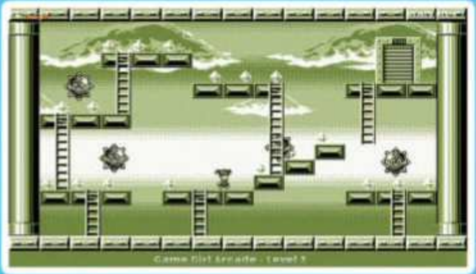
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